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**Lived Experiences of Black Women Special Education Doctoral Students at a Predominately White Institution**

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# Lived Experiences of Black Women Special Education Doctoral Students at a Predominately White Institution

**by**

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**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree, of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**December 2018**

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Carmen. You inspired my educational journey more than you will ever know, and I am looking forward to encouraging you on yours. Tag, you're it!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Audrey Sorrells for her guidance, encouragement, and patience with me throughout this process. In the years I have spent working with Dr. Sorrells, I have had numerous opportunities to learn and grow as a scholar and as a practitioner. I am appreciative of her willingness to let me explore and chart my own path. I would also like to acknowledge Drs. Terry Falcomata, North Cooc, Richard Reddick, and Barbara Pazey for taking a vested interest in me, my research, and my future success. I have benefited tremendously from the wisdom and knowledge that each of them shared with me in their classes and as members of my committee. I also want to thank Stephanie Hill-Townsend, Gina Smuts, and Alicia Zapata for saving me countless times over the years. There is no way I could have gotten through this process without their behind-the-scenes support. You are all appreciated.

I also want to thank my friends and family. Thank you to my MCSE sisters, Eboni, Julie, and Rachel. I am thankful for the memories we have created over the years, and I'm looking forward to the way we will change the world in the future. Thank you to my circle of friends that have been my biggest cheerleaders throughout this process. Michelle, Gary, Randy, Jamarr, Coach Crayton, and the rest of the crew, I appreciate the endless encouragement to finish this journey, even when there was no end in sight. To members of the Carter and Patterson families, each of you have kept me going in your own special way. Carmen, Justin, Gwen C., Gwen F., Shari, and Craig, thank you for keeping me in your thoughts and prayers. Without the support of my family, I would not have been afforded the opportunities to follow my dreams. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the loved ones I lost during the course of this journey. To my grandparents, Papa B.J., Mother Mary, Papa Manuel, and Mother Leola, thank you for providing a strong foundation upon which I was able to build. To my dad, Gregory, thank you for always

reminding me to “stay the course.” To Nana, my aunt and very first teacher, thank you for being the first person to tell me I could be and do anything. I hope I have made you all proud.

**Lived Experiences of Black Women Special Education Doctoral Students at a Predominately White Institution**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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For decades, the United States educational system has struggled to find ways to educate children of color, especially children from these populations with disabilities. One solution to address the needs of this population of children is by increasing the presence of culturally competent teachers in classrooms; however, there is also a shortage of faculty, such as black women, with the background and skill set to help develop culturally competent teachers. The shortage of black women faculty can be attributed to a number of factors, including black women's educational experiences from primary grades through their doctoral studies. Research has shown that black women in doctoral programs are more likely to experience challenges in pursuit of their education due to the intersectionality of their race and gender that can impact how they are recruited, mentored, and supported throughout their doctoral studies. This case study explores why black women believe they are needed in this niche field in education as well as their lived experiences as doctoral students in a special education program to gain an understanding of how this population of students can be better supported to complete their studies. Current doctoral students ($n$ = 4) participated in two individual interviews and a focus group. Data were member checked, coded, and analyzed for themes. Key findings from data

demonstrated that black women doctoral students: (a) experienced challenges related to navigating the academic landscapes of their institutions, (b) faced difficulties maintaining a healthy work/life/school balance, and (c) were motivated to pursue their degrees to help others in the special education field.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

The educational experience of a child who is born an ethnic minority can be full of obstacles such as lower academic achievement, disciplinary disparities, and underrepresentation in gifted and/or advanced programs that can inhibit their potential for future success (Beck, Muschkin, 2012; Warne, Anderson, & Johnson, 2013). Such limitations can be compounded when a child who is a minority also has a disability (Wei, Lenz, & Blackorby, 2013). Through education, however, minority children with disabilities can have a fighting chance to achieve in a society that, at times, can seem as though it functions to work against them. Research has shown culturally responsive teachers, particularly black teachers, can have a significant academic and developmental impact on black and minority students (Johnson & Fargo, 2014; Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Shealey, 2007). However, there is a critical shortage of culturally competent teachers and black teachers in U.S. classrooms (Boser, 2014). This shortage is due to a number of factors such as the lack of black faculty at the collegiate level who can support preservice teacher learning around culturally responsive practices (Moule & Higgins, 2007). At the root of this problem is a complex pipeline issue which highlights the need to support and develop a population of scholars who can address the shortage of black faculty, thus leading to more teachers in the K-12 workforce who can meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

One such population of scholars is black women in education doctoral programs. There exists a small body of research that explores the educational experiences of black girls and women; however, research that closely examines the connection between life-long educational experiences, motivations for pursuing a career in education that requires a doctoral degree (e.g., becoming an education professor, district administrator, or researcher), and the experiences

associated with earning a doctoral degree is limited, especially when looking to understand black women who desire to work in the special education field. This population of educators is an underexplored group; however, it can be argued that their presence in colleges of education is essential to help train the next generation of culturally competent special educators. If doctoral level faculty members and department coordinators gain a better understanding of the experiences and challenges of this group of educators, it is possible more could be done to recruit, retain, and graduate more black women with Ph.Ds. in the area of special education. It is for this reason; this study sought to examine the lived experiences and career motivations of black women doctoral students.

## Background

Black women have a storied history as educators, and throughout history, they have been proven to have positive impacts on student outcomes both academically and socially (Fairclough, 2007; 2009; Clemons, 2014, Dee, 2004). Despite the impact they have had as teachers, researchers, and professors in the education field, as a population, black women have faced their own challenges and obstacles to attaining education at all academic levels (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes & Watson, 2016). Parallels can be drawn between the experiences of black women at the primary school, secondary school, undergraduate, and graduate levels and the impact those experiences can have on things like self-efficacy, achievement, and academic risk-taking. Educational experiences can also play a role in a black woman's decision to pursue advanced degrees and/or enter into certain professions (Chambers, Walpole, & Outlaw, 2016; Davis, Otto, 2016; Haynes, Stewart, & Allen, 2016).

### Educational Experiences of Black Women

The educational experiences of black girls and women have not been examined as closely as those of black men and boys; however, there exists a small body of emerging research that examines the complete experiences of black women throughout their educational careers. Like their male counterparts, black women have also faced challenges and barriers related to their academic achievement, discipline, and ability to thrive in their educational experiences. In examining the experiences of black girls and black women comparatively, a number of shared themes exist between the experiences in primary and secondary school versus the experiences in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students.

**Primary and secondary school experiences.** Black girls in secondary school settings have been found to face challenges receiving the support and guidance they feel is necessary to be successful in school. Watson (2016) surveyed six black girls who attended a city high school, and several of them cited specific examples of not being supported by teachers and administrators because they were inaccessible, not genuine, or not concerned with exposing black students to opportunities that could help them advance. Additionally, some of the participants expressed the difficulties they faced balancing going to school and working full time to pay for their senior fees and contribute financially to their households. The girls in Watson's study shared they would have benefited from teachers and school leaders who were caring as well as actions that could have made the financial burdens associated with senior expenses.

In addition to challenges they face academically and socially, school-age black girls can also be prone to increased disciplinary actions. Wun (2016) found that black girls are rendered structurally vulnerable to more disciplinary and punishment practices in schools. Using racial formation theory, Wun drew parallels between anti-black logic and racism and their impact on how this population of girls, as well other minority girls, have been disciplined in the school

setting. The participants in Wun's study shared examples of how they were disciplined harshly for what some would consider to be minor infractions such as making smart comments or talking back. Participants also shared their feelings of being subject to hyper-surveillance and harsher punishments from their teachers who rendered simple behaviors such as putting on lip gloss or drinking a sports drink as punishable. In her study, Wun concluded that "the dominant discourses on school discipline disparities obscure a structural condition that characteristically positions black girls within a social order where their lives are illegible and inconsequential, rendering them perpetually susceptible to discipline and punishment" (pg. 748).

**Undergraduate experiences.** Research on the challenging educational experiences of black women in college have yielded similar findings as studies on the experiences of black girls in grade school. In their role as undergraduate students, young black women have been shown to experience academic difficulties, problems adjusting socially to their school setting, as well as family and financial struggles. A 2011 study conducted by Gilford and Reynolds examined the parentification of eight black women undergraduate students. Similar to existing research on the educational experiences of this population of students, key themes such as struggles with meeting the academic demands of college as well as balancing family and financial responsibilities played a significant role how the participants viewed themselves as college students as well as their ability to be successful in a university setting. The difficulties faced by black women in college have also been found to be greater when a black woman attends a predominately white institution. Francois (2010) interviewed three young black women who were first year students at a predominately white institution along the East Coast. Through her interviews, Francois found commonalities among the participants in a number of areas. To begin, the women shared experiences dealing with the emotional stress brought on by their positionality

as black women in a white educational setting. Additionally, the women shared the challenges they faced when attempting to deal with communication challenges (e.g., talking black and talking back), and how those challenges negatively impacted relationships. The participants in Francois' study all shared candid interactions with other students and their professors that highlighted both the struggles and the strengths needed to exist, let alone thrive, in an educational space. Some research on black women pursuing undergraduate degrees has also produced findings that point to the significance and positive impact of support systems and mentors to help students cope with the unique challenges and demands associated with attaining a degree. Borum and Walker (2012) found that mentoring relationships with faculty members as well as supportive programs and peer study groups were key indicators of success for black women who were pursuing undergraduate degrees in mathematics. The researchers for this study were able to draw comparisons between the experiences of participants who received advising and support from faculty mentors or who were able to work collaboratively and cooperatively with peers and those who did not have those opportunities.

**Graduate and doctoral experiences**. Researchers have explored the challenges black women graduate and doctoral students often face on their way to completion of their degree. Experiences such as marginalization within their department (Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005), feelings of isolation from their peers (Allen et al. 2000), and lack of available mentors (Valdez, 1998) are but a few of the lived experiences that have emerged in research. Additionally, black women doctoral students have also been found to face challenges balancing family and financial expectations, which are similar to the experiences of black women in pursuit of undergraduate degrees. These experiences have been particularly visible in studies examining the experiences of black women who attended predominately white institutions (Tilman, 2012) and/or were in

programs of study where issues of race and culture were not already a part of the curriculum or were not easily incorporated and explored (Robinson, 2013).

## Motivations for Pursuing an Advanced Degree in Special Education

Despite the challenges they face as students in the educational field, black women are still drawn to the pursuit of advanced degrees, particularly in the area of education. Although no existing research specifically examines the motivations of black women who seek to obtain a doctoral degree in special education, or in any other discipline in the field, there is research that highlights how black doctoral students seek to use their advanced degrees as well as how their presence in higher education can be beneficial to others.

**Use of doctoral degrees**. In a 2017 study, McCallum explored the concept of "giving back to the community" as a motivating factor for black student enrollment in a range of doctoral programs. Although the participants in this study were mixed, it is worth noting that 62% of the participants were black and 12% of the participants were pursing doctoral degrees in an education related field. Within the central theme of giving back to the community, emerged four subthemes – honoring a commitment, breaking barriers and increasing pathways, infiltrating conversations, and desire to give back to a community they felt like a part of. Of the subthemes that emerged, the themes of breaking barriers and increasing pathways is applicable to the motivations of black women given the amount of existing research that highlights the limitations and barriers black women have experienced in pursuit of their education. Participants in McCallum's study shared the belief that a trickle-down effect that would occur if there were more black faculty members teaching and mentoring in the academy. It is also possible that the theme of infiltrating conversations can be applied to the motivations of black women in pursuit of special education doctoral degrees. Participants in the study described a doctoral degree as a

tool that could give them a voice in often segregated spaces. Participants believed having a doctorate would legitimize their thoughts and options on a topic and would place them in a position of power to make decisions that can impact members of their community.

**Black faculty members as teacher trainers.** Within the existing body of research, clear links have been drawn to the impact the presence of black faculty members can have on training culturally responsive teachers as well as attracting, supporting, and retaining black students in pre-service teacher programs. Moule and Higgins (2007) found having black mentor teachers and supervising faculty was critical in helping to produce culturally competent and successful teachers of black children, particularly when the preservice teachers were white and had limited experiences with issues of diversity. Irvine and Fenwick (2011) noted that education programs at historically black colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which often have predominantly black faculty, can be beneficial for recruiting black teachers, training culturally responsive teachers, and helping school districts offer supports (e.g. induction programs and professional development) that can lead to the retention of teachers that work in schools that serve black students.

Although the research on the impact of black faculty seems promising, there is a lack of black faculty at many colleges of education. This is not surprising considering black faculty make up approximately 6% of the 1.5 million total faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, which is made up of close to 80% White faculty (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Numerous causes have been attributed to the underrepresentation of black faculty in higher education. One of the most obvious causes is the lack of attainment of doctoral degrees by black students, particularly as a result of challenges that black students face in pursuit of their doctoral degree (e.g. lack of faculty support and financial barriers). Despite being

underrepresented in doctoral programs as both students and faculty, there is a glimmer of hope for black scholars in education. Education-related programs have historically been the discipline in which most black students earn Ph.Ds., and this trend is showing no signs of changing in the near future (The Journal of blacks in Higher Education, 2006). Additionally, as of 2014, the percentage of black women with doctoral degrees has surpassed all other race and gender combinations, with black women earning 65% of all doctoral degrees awarded to black scholars (United States Department of Education, 2012). Based on the data, a clear picture of the future of black teacher educators can be painted, and it is the face of a black woman.

## Purpose for the Study

As a population of students, black women do not always have the benefit of receiving the types of educational experiences that will enable them to successfully complete their doctoral studies. This has potential implications for their ability to become faculty members in colleges of education where they can have a positive influence on future generations of culturally competent educators through their ability to recruit, mentor, and support educators with the skills to effectively teach black and minority children. This study seeks to examine the experiences of black women in a special education doctoral program as well as their motivations for pursing such a degree. The purpose of examining this population and their experiences is to shed light on those experiences that can inform interventions aimed at recruiting, mentoring, and supporting black women during their studies and as they pursue faculty positions.

## Research Questions

The following two research questions will guide this investigation:

1. What are the lived experiences of black women doctoral students in a special education program at a predominately white institution?

2. What motivates black women to pursue doctoral degrees in special education?

## Definition of Key Terms

*Lived experience:* Lived experience is a term that is often used to describe the first-hand accounts of an individual living as a member of a minority or oppressed group. This phenomenological concept calls on individuals to focus on the experience of life events and how they are transformed into consciousness to guide everyday life and actions (Merriam, 2009). This study will examine how life events experienced by black women shape their educational and professional motivations and experiences.

## Summary

The challenges that black girls face in the school setting are similar to the experiences that black women face as undergraduate and graduate students. Despite the educational barriers and obstacles that exist, black women continue to pursue advanced degrees as a means to positively impact their community and make a difference in their field of work. Research has shown black women can have a positive impact on the achievement of K-12 students as well as in the development of culturally competent preservice teachers; however, black women are underrepresented in doctoral programs in education, especially special education. To provide a deeper examination of the lived experiences of black women in doctoral programs, the second chapter of this proposal will continue with a literature review on the topic. The third chapter will include an overview of the research design and methodology that will be used to explore the research questions. The findings from the study will be shared in the fourth chapter, and the fifth chapter will highlight themes from the data and the major implications from the study.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### Introduction

There exists a limited amount of research on the lived experiences of black women doctoral students; however, a thorough search of literature on the topic yielded a number of studies that shed light on the unique perspectives of black women in pursuit of doctoral degrees in education. Studies that emerged in the literature sought to share and highlight the experiences of black women, explicitly explore obstacles experienced by black women, and provide ideas for ways in which black women doctoral students can be better supported in the academy. The findings and discussions across the studies share a number of themes related to the unique challenges of black women doctoral students. The challenges discussed fell into two broad categories related to navigating the academic landscape of an institution and maintaining a healthy school/work/life balance.

### Navigating the Academic Landscape of an Institution

**Cultural beliefs.** Understanding cultural beliefs, knowledge, and adaptation is one area in which many participants from the included studies faced challenges and barriers. Participants in Robinson's (2013) study shared how they were subjected to learning environments where discussions often devalued their ethnic identity and cultural experiences. One participant, Patricia, shared there seemed to be little to no consequences for white students who did not understand black culture, but that there were significant consequences for blacks who did not comprehend white cultural knowledge. Taylor, a participant in Williams' (2009) study described how she experienced culture shock at her institution and did not feel accommodated by the faculty. In the Fries-Britt & Turner (2005) study, one participant shared how she went through a painful racial identity development process as she tried to make sense of her unconscious hatred

of her black self and feeling the need to hide her blackness in the academy. From an academic perspective, Tillman (2012) shared she needed to learn how to write like a white man because the faculty in her department was not impressed with her writing as a black female. A participant in Johnson-Bailey's (2004) study shared a similar experience of being told she "wrote black" and her writing was inferior and unacceptable. Participants from Williams' study shared how there was a need to learn how to write for their audience of white professors, since so many black doctoral students have trouble with writing. Souto-Manning & Ray (2007) shared how her peers were resistant to talking about race during class discussions and how that was indicative of a larger institutional silence on the topic.

**Difficulties speaking up and speaking out**. In multiple studies, participants shared the difficulties they faced when speaking up or speaking out against the dominant discourse on black issues in their classes. Ellis (2001) found that some black females found their classroom climate to be problematic and cited how students could be made to feel uncomfortable if they raised issues that a professor deemed irrelevant. Blackwell (2010) examined ways in which educational discussions could be anti-racist for students of color and found while it is important for White students gain understanding about the negative impacts of race, students of color often pay the price for it when they are tasked with going through the painful process of sharing experiences. The focus of Robinson's (2013) study was on black women as "spoketokens," the token black females who, when it comes to discourse on black issues, must often decide when to speak or not to speak and for whom and what purposes. Crystal, a participant from Robinson's study shared her discomfort in confronting her white friends about issues of racial prejudice within conversations. Instead of explicitly naming her friends and their behaviors as racist, she instead used strategies such as avoidance and silence in order to preserve her relationships. Another

participant, Angela, advised that black students could avoid the risk of being labeled as a "problem child" by avoiding speaking up and disagreeing during discussions. She went on to share how she felt faculty were not trying to facilitate the success of minority students and perceived black students who spoke up for themselves as being loud, rude, and offensive. This belief was also supported by Truitt (2010) who found when black graduate students believed their professors viewed them in stereotypical ways, some may seek refuge by disengaging from the learning environment completely.

**Lack of academic advising or support.** A lack of academic and advising support from professors also emerged as a trend that made it difficult for black women in pursuit of doctoral degrees. Several studies shed light on how students lacked the academic support of their professors (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Williams, et al., 2005; Borum & Walker, 2012). Borum and Walker (2012) found black women in mathematics Ph.D. programs cited little to no support and discriminatory practices as negatively impacting their graduate experience. Participants shared that faculty members were not concerned about whether they obtained a graduate degree, and two participants decided not to pursue a doctoral degree due to the traumatic experiences they faced as master's students that lowered their self-esteem as potential Ph.D. students. Two participants from Johnson-Bailey's (2005) study were discouraged from applying to doctoral programs by faculty members, which made them feel uncomfortable and not welcome as students. Johnson-Bailey (2004) study found students lacked real knowledge about what was necessary to be a doctoral student beyond what could be found in a student handbook. She also highlighted how the lack of black professors who could mentor black students was a challenge considering how students described the interactions and support from white faculty members as inadequate or insignificant.

## Maintaining a Healthy School/Work/Life Balance

**Financial support and working.** Financial support, or the lack thereof, was another trend that emerged in the literature. Multiple participants in research studies expressed difficulties with the financial aspects of being a doctoral student, and several held demanding full-time jobs while going to school (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero 1996 & Williams, 2009). Williams (2009) noted that due to financial restraints, an increasing number of students are working full-time and struggle to meet the bourgeoning demands of doctoral studies while balancing their family and community demands. None of the participants in Johnson-Bailey's 2004 study received graduate assistantships in their first year and the four participants who did hold assistantships only applied after hearing about them from other black students. Four participants also shared they had to adjust their course load to correspond with their finances, thus adding to the time they spent as students. Some studies in the available literature indicated participants worked while going to school. Participants in the Magano (2011) study shared their experiences as working students and chronicled the obstacles they faced. Reneilwe, for example, worked at the university where she was pursuing her degree, and her colleagues began to overload her with work to the point where she changed schools. Once at her new school, she was faced with a supervisor who stole her research and presented on it at conferences, and who denied her time off that she needed. Johnson-Bailey & Cervero (1996) conducted a study of the experiences of reentry black women who were balancing a full-time job, family and school and described how the women used diligence, negotiation, and resistance to respond to the direct impact of racism, sexism, and classism in school and the larger society. Two of the participants, Faye and Juanita, shared how they endured long commutes between their homes, work, and school because they had to work to support themselves and their families while pursuing their

degrees. Juanita also shared how doing so negatively impacted her health. Carol, a participant in the Williams (2009) study described her pursuit of a doctoral degree as a real financial sacrifice.

**Acceptance within the institutional community.** Having a sense of belonging and being accepted by the community within their institution is something that several participants identified as a challenge they faced as doctoral students. One participant in the Williams et al. (2005) study shared how her thoughts were often riddled with self-doubt and stereotype threats which caused her to feel as though her acceptance into a selective Research I institution was on the basis of her race and not her abilities. This participant went on to share how her feelings were validated by faculty members she worked with as well as by undergraduate students she supervised who were condescending towards her. Ellis (2001) found black female doctoral students felt more alienated on predominately white campuses than any other group and had little, if any, connection with their doctoral communities. Johnson-Baily et al. (2009) reported similar findings indicating that participants felt isolated from their university, connected only by a fragile thread to their departments. Participants in this study described specific examples of racial incidents they experienced at their universities such as slurs being written on campus and professors telling racist jokes. In the Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey (2010) study, a participant commuted over 1000 miles a week to and from class, and she believed that her community status limited her interactions with the student community as well as negatively impacted her relationships with faculty members in her department. Participants in the Schwartz et al. (2003) study shared how White students within their own degree program excluded them from social events, organizations, and study groups. Separation and isolation did not just occur within an institution or academic community. Participants in the Schwartz et al. (2003) study shared the nuanced challenges of how being a black woman in pursuit of a doctoral degree can distance

them from family and friends who may not have the same level of education. Studies included in this synthesis found that for some women, there was a need to disprove negative stereotypes and expectations that are applied to black women. Karen, a participant in Robinson's (2013) study, shared she could not fail at her attempt to earn a Ph.D. because she could not disappoint her parents and her failure would represent failure of an entire race.

**Personal relationships.** Schwartz et al. (2003) studied the experiences of black women in graduate school and provided insight into the personal lives of the participants, which is something that few of the studies did. A majority of the women in the study were single at the time the research was conducted, and 14% had children or grandchildren in their care. Ten of the women included in the study indicated their pursuit of a graduate degree inhibited or deterred their relationships with black men. Fries-Britt & Turner (2005) briefly touched on the topic of romantic relationships when one participant shared she didn't feel black men were attracted to her.

**Forming a new type of pipeline.** In the field of education, the school-to-prison pipeline is used to describe the path that thousands of children from marginalized populations follow from low performing schools into the criminal justice system. Within this pipeline, black and Latino children, especially boys, can experience a number of conditions that put them on the path to prison such as poverty, lack of access to health care, and other adverse experiences (Osher et al., 2012). Of the conditions that these children encounter, their experiences at school, is arguably the key factor in influencing the school to prison pipeline along with the all of the educational and academic inequities related race, gender, and poverty (e.g. achievement gaps and opportunity gaps). Contemporary researchers are increasingly pointing to the need for teachers who are culturally competent and culturally responsive to help bring an end to decades of

minority children being marginalized by the U.S. educational system (Johnson & Fargo, 2014; Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; & Shealey, 2007). In order for teachers to develop the skills to be culturally competent and responsive, they need to be taught by faculty who also possess these desired skills. Findings from the literature demonstrate that black women doctoral students are interested in studying topics related to race and culture as well as serving as a voice to lift up the unique challenges that are faced by black people in the field of education and in other disciplines (Robinson, 2013; Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007; & Ellis, 2001). A number of participants in the studies in the literature expressed that they wanted to use their knowledge and degree to help other black people and advance black causes. If institutions of higher learning can better support black women doctoral students to get through programs and become the teachers of teachers, this new type of pipeline could have tremendous effects on the future of black and minority children in U.S. schools.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks were used to guide this study. They were: (a) black feminist thought and (b) interpretivism. Black feminist thought is referenced in some of the existing research on black women doctoral students as a way to attempt to understand the intersectionality of race and gender for this population. Interpretivism, by name, does not appear in any current research about this group of students; however, it can be argued that some studies are based on interpretivist principals without explicitly describing them as such. In examining the literature on these two theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear how they can be applied to the study of the experiences of black women.

**Black feminist thought.** Black feminist thought is a theoretical framework that is situated in understanding the unique experiences of black women within a historical and

contextualized frame of reference that also empowers them as producers of knowledge (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). This framework reflects the distinctive themes of Black women and their experiences related to work, home/family responsibilities, politics, sexuality and other topics (Collins, 2009). Black feminist thought also employs a range of qualitative methodologies that allow researchers to gain insight into lived experiences and their relationship to the central themes of black female existence. Dillard (2000) points out that given recent interest in multiculturalism in society, alternative epistemological truths are required in order to gain an understanding of diverse and complex populations.

Collins' (2009) framework of black feminist thought includes seven core themes which are used to interpret the experiences of black women. They are: work, family, and black women's oppression; mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images; the power of self-definition; the sexual politics of black womanhood; black women's love relationships; black women and motherhood; and rethinking black women's activism. Many of these themes are weaved into the context of this study and discussed in later chapters.

**Interpretivism.** Interpretivism is a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand and describe the world in which we live. Interpretivism was conceptualized as an anti-positivist perspective that departed from the detached, value-free natural science approach of inquiry that dominated the early years of social science research. Instead, the interpretivist approach makes use of "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1999, p. 67). With interpretivism, the ontological view is that reality is subjective and constructed by the individuals who are living in that reality. Sipe and Constable (1996) describe interpretivists as those who believe that there are many truths due to the inability to make distinctions between the knower and the known. Since reality and truth are constructed through

discourse, there exist no constraints on what an individual can believe or express. In their effort to formulate their understanding of the world around them, interpretivists look at situations based on the point of view of the individuals who are experiencing those situations and seek to use strategies to help individuals discover the reasoning behind their thoughts and actions. This heuristic method is a hallmark of interpretivism and is best facilitated through the transactional, reciprocal relationship between interpretivist researchers and the individuals that they seek to learn from and help (Sipe & Constable, 1996). Interpretivism is an organic and communal paradigm, as the interactions of the researcher and the researched ultimately form reality. Although interpretivism is mostly presented in sharp contrast to the more popular positivism framework, in some instances, the two frameworks can be complimentary. Although interpretivism is mostly viewed as a subjective approach, Roth and Mehta (2002) note that it is possible to accept that there is both a single objective truth and multiple subjective views of that objective truth that are shaped by the perspectives of the individuals experiencing a situation. This view provides a sort of middle ground, but still allows for significant dependence on the experience of the individuals to give meaning to facts.

Throughout history, the interpretivist approach has existed in varying forms – symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Symbolic interactionism seeks to find meaning through the exploration and understanding of culture. Blumer (as cited in Crotty, 1999, p. 72) often referenced interpretation of interactionist assumptions states that humans act toward things based on their meanings, which are derived from social interactions and modified through an interpretive process. When viewed through the lens of pragmatist philosophy, symbolic interactionism emerges as a reflexive practice that calls on one to find meaning in experiences as a way of exploring culture and truth (Crotty, 1999). Phenomenology takes a more cautious

approach when seeking to understand culture due to its perceived limitations. Crotty notes that the traditional view of phenomenology suggests that if individuals lay aside the often-prevalent understandings of the phenomena they experience and focus instead on their immediate experience of the phenomena, it increases the possibility of the emergence of new meaning or the enhancement of former meaning. In more modern times, phenomenology has come to be viewed simply as a study of individuals' subjective and everyday experiences in an uncritical manner (Crotty, 1999). With either approach there is a focus on understanding experiences and deriving meaning from those experiences. Hermeneutics originated as the science of biblical interpretation, but over time it also came to be understood as a way of "reading" human practice, events, and situations in a way that brings understanding (Crotty, 1999). As a form of interpretivism, hermeneutics calls for researchers to find meaning in the details that they observe. At its core, interpretivism is an exploratory paradigm, and in practice, it calls for researchers to employ methods that enable them to not only observe, but also understand individuals and their experiences.

Interpretivism unequivocally lends itself to qualitative research methodologies. Interpretivist researchers usually begin by looking at a significant situation and then exploring how certain groups of individuals understand and respond to it (Roth & Mehta, 2002). Because the interpretivist paradigm centers on the belief that there are many truths, the objective truth-seeking mechanisms of the positivist approach are not of use to gain understanding. Instead, interpretivist researchers use a variety of methods that allow them to see and make use of individual interpretations of situations. Ethnography, grounded theory, game theory, phenomenology and heuristic inquiry are but a few methodological approaches that can be employed to find truths.

Ethnographic research calls for researchers to become aware of the viewpoints and attitudes of others and deduce meaning through interpretation. Individuals must put themselves in the place of those that they are studying and close observe and take in as much as they can about the individual, the culture, and the situations in order to draw themes and findings (Crotty, 1999). Grounded theory is an interactionist form of ethnographic research that uses a series of purposely planned steps to inform theoretical ideas. The process used with grounded theory is a highly inductive one, and researchers must be detailed in their observations to ensure that their deductions are made from the observed and experienced data and nothing else (Crotty, 1999). Game theory is used to analyze social interaction through the familiar concept of a game. Within a game, there are rules, and the rules determine who can play, how to play, and how to win. (Crotty, 1999). When interpretivist researchers use game theory methodology, the participants are the players and the observed social events and interactions inform the rules that are ultimately interpreted. Phenomenological research methods typically involve researchers collecting and interpreting data in ways that do not prejudice their subjective character. Researchers are careful not to impose their presuppositions and construction on the data, and often do so by bracketing their views. Additionally, phenomenological researchers often use unstructured interviews to gather data and employ validation methods to ensure that themes that they find in the data are true (Crotty, 1999). Heuristic inquiry is a form of self-discovery research, where the researcher and the researched find meaning though observation, reflection, and analysis. There are multiple other interpretivist methodologies, but overall, research methods tend to require that researchers gather data in a manner that allows for individual truths to be shared and interpreted free from criticism and researcher influence.

# Chapter 3: Methods

## Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study

The conceptual approach to this study was similar to Dillard's (2009) *endarkened feminist epistemology* in that it adapted an existing or mainstream paradigm in a way that made it more useful for the population that is being studied. Interpretivism was the adapted and applied paradigm that was layered over black feminist thought. Roth and Mehta (2002) note that the interpretivist approach illuminates a set of social meanings that can be used to reflect cultural beliefs and values. With interpretivism's focus on lived experiences and understanding occurrences from sociocultural perspectives, and black feminist thought's focus on historical sociocultural context that is specific to black women, a black feminist thought paradigm was created that allowed the researcher to use a more widely acknowledged and accepted paradigm while allowing for a strong influence of a paradigm that is rooted in blackness.

The researcher believed interpretivism and black feminist thought to be extremely similar; however, in the literature, the latter paradigm has been viewed as a less than desirable approach for research. Even though both paradigms focus on experiences and perspectives and utilize very similar methodologies, it seems as though black feminist thought still may not live up to the accepted standards of the research world, possibly for no reason other than it was created by black women for black women and insiders are unable to or do not care to understand it. Collins (2009) asserts that as outsiders in the academy, black women scholars have long been unable to legitimize the epistemological perspectives that best capture their perspectives and experiences. She also notes that black women academics who want to promote black feminist thought must use Eurocentric epistemologies to do so. This was the intention of the researcher;

however, through continued exploration of paradigms and epistemologies, the researcher attempted to devise a way to truly blend the two without taking away from the key themes and structures that make up black feminist thought. The researcher's understanding of black feminist thought and interpretivism were used to guide the process by which the researcher constructed interviews, interpreted data, and analyzed for themes.

## Research Questions

The following two research questions guided the investigation:

1. What are the lived experiences of black women doctoral students in a special education program at a predominately white institution?
2. What motivates black women to pursue doctoral degrees in special education?

## Setting and Context

This study took place at a large public research university in the southwestern United States. The university is the flagship institution of a larger statewide system that educates over 200,000 students across the state. The university is categorized as a predominately white institution (PWI) based on its population demographics. For this study, a PWI is defined as an institution of higher learning in which people who are white account for 50% or more of the population (Brown & Dancy, 2009).

## Participants

Participants were recruited for this study through the use of homogeneous sampling, which is a subtype of purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). With purposive homogenous sampling, there is a focus on a particular subgroup of participants with similar characteristics. Participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network via email contact. Participants ($n$=4) included women who a) self-identified as black or African American, b) self-identified as

female, c) and were enrolled full time in a special education-related doctoral program at the onset of the study. The study was limited to four participants to keep the case size manageable.

Due to the small number of participants as well as the potential for them to be identified, demographic descriptions are shared in the aggregate. All four participants identified as African American or black and were between the ages of 30 and 39. One participant was from the southwest United States, one participant was from the southern United States, one participant was from the northeastern United States, and one participant declined to share where she was from. All participants were in special education doctoral programs, and three identified their concentration as being multicultural. Participants' time in their respective programs ranged from three years to six years; however, all participants began their programs during a period of transition for the special education department at their institution. During this transition, it is important to note that some faculty members left the institution, which resulted in structural changes to the special education department overall. One participant completed her doctoral requirements during the course of the study, and the remaining three participants were at various stages of their programs. Each participant indicated that they held a bachelor's degree and at least one graduate degree, and one participant held two graduate degrees. All four participants held master's degrees in a special education-related area. Two participants were employed full-time while pursuing their Ph.D., and they both worked in the public education sector. The remaining two participants held part-time jobs. One participant indicated that she held multiple part time jobs teaching and consulting, and the other participant declined to share her employer. Two participants shared that they were married, and two participants identified as being single and never married. One participant identified herself as being a parent. At the start of the study,

each participant selected a pseudonym that they used for all interviews. Participants were Adofo, Bobbi, Gabby, and Samantha.

## Methodology

### Case Study

According to Yin (2014), case study is an empirical inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (pg. 16). For this study, the researcher investigated the lived experiences faced by black women doctoral students (the "case") within the bounded system of a special education program at a PWI. The case was a local, exploratory, interpretive multiple case study (Thomas, 2011). Thomas (2011) stated that a local case is one that has its origins in the researcher's own knowledge, and that a research project can be sparked from a person noticing something interesting or unusual. As a black woman in a special education doctoral program at a PWI, who also holds degrees from two other PWIs, the researcher experienced challenges in pursuit of her education. She also noticed how other black women in her peer group experienced similar challenges. After more than a decade of observing and living the phenomenon of black women experiencing challenges in the academy, the researcher decided to focus her research on this topic and conduct an empirical exploration of the challenges using an interpretive approach. Thomas stated that interpretative inquiry is "a form of inquiry that employs a particular approach to answering questions – an approach that assumes an in-depth understanding and deep immersion in the environment of the subject" (pg. 124). To some extent, the researcher had an in-depth understanding of the barriers faced by black women doctoral students; however, it was the hope of the researcher to use this study as an opportunity to look at the experiences of other women in a detailed way by asking

questions and spending time listening to how they reflect on their experiences. This study was a multiple case study because the researcher examined the experiences of the four participants individually to speak to the larger phenomenon of which they were a part of. The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the day-to-day experiences and challenges in order to better inform practice.

## Data Collection Procedures

For this study, the researcher collected data from two individual interviews with each participant and one focus group that included three of the participants.

**Demographic questionnaire.** Prior to the start of the first interview, each participant was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to gather information about participants' age, gender identity, ethnicity, educational background, current educational status, current employment status, and relationship/familial status.

**Interviews.** The researcher conducted prolonged case study interviews during the study. Yin (2014) describes prolonged case study interviews as those that "may take place over 2 or more hours, either in a single setting or over an extended period of time covering multiple settings" (pg. 110). The researcher conducted two prolonged case study interviews with each participant during the spring 2018 and summer 2018 semesters. Each interview was structured to take up to 2 hours; however, they all took between 30 and 60 minutes. During the first interview, questions were used to gather initial data on participants' motivation for pursing a doctoral degree in special education, how they view their experiences as black women doctoral students, and what barriers they have faced in pursuit of their degree. The second interview served as a follow-up from the first interview and focus group, and participants were asked to continue to reflect on their experiences and barriers to success. They were asked to reflect on their

experience in during the focus group as well as what they believe they need to be successful in their future pursuits. The interview questions were framed using principles of black feminist thought and findings from similar studies in the field.

All interviews were conducted at a location of the participants' choosing. Two participants did both of their interviews over the phone. Two participants opted to meet in person for the first interview and speak over the phone for the second interview. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher also took typed notes during the interviews.

**Focus group.** In addition to the interviews, an approximately 90-minute focus group, a type of shorter case study interview (Yin, 2014), was held. The researcher moderated a discussion about the participants' experiences and perceptions using initial themes from the first interview. This focus group took place between the two interviews. Three of the four participants elected to participate in the focus group. One participant requested not to participate in the focus group; however, some of the focus group questions were added to her second interview. Like the prolonged case study interviews, the questions that were used to facilitate the focus groups were developed using relevant literature. A focus group was included as a data source because the researcher believed that group psychology would have an impact on the phenomenon that was of interest to for the study (Thomas, 2011). Due to the varied locations and busy schedules of the participants, the focus group took place over the phone using a conference line. The focus group was digitally audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher, and the researcher took typed notes during the session.

## Data Analysis.

### Qualitative Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews and focus group were analyzed, member-checked, and triangulated using cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014). With cross-case synthesis, each case is treated as a separate study and findings are aggregated across the cases. It also allows for the possible incorporation of some quantitative techniques. Following each interview and the single focus group, the researcher reviewed the typed transcript and running notes, and used them to create a bulleted summary memo with key themes and findings that could be determined based on participant responses to the questions. After a summary memo was completed, it was sent to the participant, along with the transcript, for review and feedback. If a participant provided feedback, those changes were noted in the memo prior to it being finalized. After all of the data was collected for both the interviews and focus group, the researcher began the process of analyzing the individual cases and data for themes. Using the summary memos from the interviews and focus group, the researcher developed a coding system based on the central themes and subthemes from the literature (i.e., navigating the academic landscape of an institution and maintaining a healthy school/work/life balance). The researcher then compared the themes for all of the cases collectively to identify the trends that emerged for the group of women. The researcher also applied a conceptual framework for the analysis that is rooted in black feminist thought to explain why and how certain findings emerge.

**Member checking.** After each interview, the researcher used the transcripts to produce brief memos summarizing key themes. Member checking techniques were used to achieve added credibility for this study. Following each interview, the transcript and memo were shared with individual participants via email to ensure the researcher accurately captured what was communicated. Participants were asked to send corrections, clarifications, and/or comments on information they would like to have redacted from the study.

As with the interviews, the researcher used the transcript and notes to create a memo summarizing key themes from the discussion. The memo was sent to each participant as a way of member checking the accuracy of what was shared. For both the prolonged interviews and the focus group, the researcher wanted to ensure the data that was produced and collected wasn't influenced by any biases that she may have considering her positionality as a black women doctoral student in a special education program. Yin (2014) pointed out that reflexivity can be an issue with interviews, and the researcher wanted to ensure that it is not a case with her study.

**Triangulation.** The researcher employed triangulation as a strategy to ensure the existence of various data sources. The two interviews with each participant and one joint focus group provided multiple sources of data from which an analysis could be done. By having four participants for the individual interviews, this allowed multiple perspectives from which to draw from.

### Researcher Positionality and Precautions

As a black woman, who is a doctoral student in a special education program at a PWI, the researcher took extra precautions to ensure her positionality did not bias any data collection and analysis. In addition to having multiple perspectives and sources of data to triangulate, the researcher utilized member checking as another means to make the findings more credible.

## Summary of Methods

A qualitative research approach was used to investigate the research questions. Multiple interviews and one case study produced data that was then analyzed for themes. Using a bounded case study approach, the researcher was able to examine the individual motivations and lived experiences of participants within the context of their shared existence in the same system of a special education program at a PWI.

# Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of black women in a special education doctoral program as well as their motivations for pursing such a degree. The purpose of examining this population and their experiences was to shed light on those experiences that can inform interventions aimed at recruiting, mentoring, and supporting black women during their studies and as they pursue faculty positions. The following research questions guided the study.

## Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of black women doctoral students in a special education program at a predominately white institution?
2. What motivates black women to pursue doctoral degrees in special education?

A qualitative bounded case study using four black women doctoral students in special education-related programs was used to determine answers for the research questions. Data from interviews and one focus group was collected and analyzed to determine results.

## Research Question 1

The focus of the first research question was to examine the experiences of black women doctoral students to gain an understanding of barriers to their success as well as identify strategies that can be used to help them. Responses from the interview and focus group questions yielded multiple themes and subthemes in topics that were largely aligned to findings from existing research on the experiences of black women in academic settings. The following themes will be discussed below:

- Navigating the Academic Landscape of an Institution

- Maintaining a Healthy School/Work/Life Balance
- Positionality and Relationships
- Positive Reflections and Systems of Support

**Navigating the academic landscape of an institution.** A majority of the questions asked during the study focused on the experiences of participants within the context of their role as students at their university.

***Isolated.*** Early in the initial interviews, the researcher asked participants to share general reflections on their experiences as a doctoral student. Each participants' response indicated some degree of negativity associated with their experiences, and a common theme of not feeling like they belonged emerged from each participants' statements. Bobbi, for example, shared,

> I don't feel like I belong here. I don't feel like I do. So, I'm like I have classes here. I take classes, and I go back to my family or my community where I feel like I can be myself.

***Uncomfortable.*** Gabby's reflections indicated that she also wasn't comfortable in her role as a student. She described how it was initially easy for her to start the program; however, as she progressed through the program, she realized that being in her specific concentration, multicultural special education, was problematic, even as a person of color. Gabby stated,

> I feel that initially it was easy to kind of get started with the program. We were in a cohort. All of my peers were all in the same classes. Well the first semester, pretty much. I got to meet some people at orientation, but as I went through the program, I just quickly realized being in multicultural is not really…The program that is like the preference of the concentrations. Like, if there's an opening to be like a TA or GRA, you're probably not going to hear about it, much less get it, if you get an interview. So, I figured that out quickly. Like multicultural is kind of like the redheaded stepchild of the department. I also realized that our department is lacking in diversity.

Gabby's views about her program reflect a historical trend found in black feminist thought in which black women have been unequally incorporated into social institutions such as schools, jobs, and neighborhoods (Collins, 2009). Because of this lack of incorporation, black

women do not get the opportunity to be socialized properly into new systems that are not built for them to function successfully in. Gabby went on to describe how she sought out other programs with more diversity, which in a way had systems in place to helped her to transition more smoothly into a new environment. She shared,

> And I assumed it was just because we live in […], but then as I took classes in other departments, I realized that no, it's just our program. So, I took classes in two other areas in the School of Ed., the College of Ed., and I saw more people that looked like me that were students and professors, and more people of color, in general, that were students and professors. So, I'm glad I was able to kind of create my own path and mainly because we didn't have a lot of professors in multicultural anymore. For me to be able to take certain classes, I had to go out of the department, and I'm so thankful that I did because I feel like if I didn't I would have been even more miserable. I did everything that I could to finish my program as quickly as possible because I hated being there. I hated being at […]. I hated being in […]. I felt isolated. So, I knew I was here kind of like to get my education and that was it. So, I took as many classes as I could. I took classes every summer. I was like I have to finish this in four years. […] I kind of came into this knowing that I didn't want to be a professor, but I really confirmed that I definitely don't want to be a professor after going through the program. And I don't want anything to do with academia at all. It's exactly what I thought it was as far as not being very accepting of people of color, and I just don't need those types of frustrations in my day-to-day life. I have to deal with that enough as a black woman. I don't need to add that on to my work environment that I'm intentionally walking into the fire on a daily basis.

***Anti-black environment.*** Adofo's description of her experiences also echoed those of the other participants and like Gabby, she explicitly described her experiences in relation to being black. She shared,

> I think it was a very anti-black environment, a very white supremist institution. Nothing was based on the actual cultural or racial elements in special ed. Disproportionality was addressed in a few of the courses, but overall, it was an unspoken thing of, blacks are inferior. They're not as smart, and in some ways, they are more aggressive, and they are needing special education versus white supremacy puts them there because of the racial, historical environment, that black people have been enduring since being brought here as slaves.

***Different expectations.*** Samantha reflected on her experience as a doctoral student by comparing it to what she had expected based on what she went through to obtain her prior degrees. She expressed that she thought pursing a Ph.D. would be somewhat similar to what she

faced as a master's level student; however, it turned out to not be what she expected. She particularly mentioned the lack of prescriptiveness of her program and the absence of relationships. Samantha stated,

> I went into the program thinking that my experience at the Ph.D. level would be about the same as it was at the master's level, except for, as one of our professors put it, instead of consuming, being a consumer of the literature, that I am now in charge of producing it. […] I would like to say that it is not all negative, but it hasn't been a positive experience. It is definitely not what I expected. It is not as structured or organized as I expected it to be. It's not as prescriptive as other doctoral programs that I'm now hearing about. I feel like I haven't gotten to know many of the faculty. I don't have those relationships or connections that I definitely do have in my previous programs, and I completed those programs more than ten years ago. So, those are relationships I still have today, where I feel like I barely know the people that I've been in this process with for […] years.

Participants' initial views about their experiences started of general; however, throughout the interview and focus group process, participants' descriptions and reflections became increasingly descriptive and more nuanced. The sections that follow highlight subthemes that emerged from participants' responses to more specific questions about their experiences.

***Challenges and barriers to success associated with being a doctoral student.*** When asked to reflect on their challenges as a doctoral student, multiple common themes emerged.

***Racial and ethnic identity.*** three of the four participants shared challenges they faced due to their racial and/or ethic identity. Bobbi acknowledged that pursing a Ph.D. should be challenging, however, she added,

> It has been challenging based on my own, personal experiences. As a mom, as a racially or ethnically minority person. […] I don't know if it would be different if all of those things I mentioned are different. But, those are my daily experiences that really make things challenging apart from taking classes and the rigor of being a Ph.D. student.

Similarly, both Gabby and Adofo drew connections between being a person of color and facing challenges in their programs. Gabby divulged,

> I kind of felt like the challenge came from, in the classroom, being sometimes the only person of color, or even more so, the only person in my concentration. And then kind of

> being singled out as the person to speak to multicultural issues even though I'm here, I'm in school, I'm here to learn. I'm not an expert, but the need to really fill that role was challenging. And it's something that I didn't want to do. I just wanted to come and learn. I didn't want to feel like when professors have a question about something, that they are going to come to me, or they're going to ask me. That happened in so many classes, and I really didn't care for it. But then I also felt like in the moment, I have to say something. So, I feel like that was just really challenging, but it was really hard to be in the program and feel maybe I made the wrong choice, as in like my concentration. Maybe I should have done something else. I got into the program and then realized, okay there's really nothing here for you, so make the best of it. That was definitely challenging. I didn't know that I was walking into a sinking ship.

Adofo described her challenges as being more psychological in nature. She emotionally stated,

> Consistently, in many classes, you came across people who were oblivious to history, oblivious to the racial-wealth gap in this country, oblivious to colorism. So, it was extremely disheartening being around an environment that was psychologically damaging because it's anti-black. So, you have deal with a lot, you have a lot of coping mechanisms to be able to interpret all of the information that you're getting consistently. The thing is, often times it's overt, and many times, it's covert.

***Distance.*** In speaking specifically about barriers to success beyond the general challenges she described, Adofo also discussed how distance presented a unique barrier to her. She spoke about the lack of allies for her as a black student. She shared,

> […] Barriers probably with the distance now because everything is remote. So, out of sight, out of mind. That's the barriers of, you know, I'm not in your face. […] Also not having allies. When you are black, and you are studying black people, ain't nobody care about that […]. You don't have allies. If you're doing something generic, you're doing an intervention, you're doing something on autism, you're doing something specifically what the department is run by, then okay, you're good to go. But if you're studying something, you know, I'm sorry, nigga people, you know.

***Knowing and meeting expectations.*** Samantha spoke to her challenges with simply knowing what to do in the program and how to meet expectations that were not always clear. When asked to think about her experiences in terms of specific barriers to completion, Samantha acknowledged that barriers are meant to keep someone from certain things. She expressed that she

did learn about research; however, there were some challenges with learning exactly how to make use of what she learned from a procedural perspective She shared,

> I think some of the challenges were one, knowing what you are supposed to do. We got a handbook. We were able to look through the handbook for some basic information and general questions about the procedure, but we never revisited it. Even though we were advised each semester, advising was just about which classes you were going to take next, rather than what your actual next steps were going to be. So, I think that is a challenge, just knowing what you are supposed to do and how to navigate that. Second, even though you take classes with many different professors, and you learn all about their work, you don't really learn about how your work can fit into that, and they don't really give you any feedback about what you're trying to do and how that class can help you with your work. So, I did learn things. I did learn about research and how to start to do that, how to start to navigate the process of research, but I think that it has been somewhat difficult. Like a real difficulty in this program of trying to go from okay I understand what you're telling me about the research, and how do I then put that into production for my own research? Like, what steps do I need to be taking?

Along these lines, Bobbi expressed that knowing exactly what to do was a barrier to success for her. She stressed,

> I realized I just have to do more, which is what I've been doing. And, I haven't allowed that to stop me. I've had to do extra to kind of look for look for resources outside of what I have. I believe for me, no one is able to provide.

***Access to opportunities.*** Gabby also mentioned barriers she faced related to access and opportunities. She shared that she felt as though she had been successful; however, she explained,

> I would attribute that 100% to my graduate coordinator that I had, who I pretty much depended on for everything. So, that's genuinely why I'm graduating at this point because there was so much that I didn't know. I didn't have anyone to ask, or anyone to help me, and no one was really guiding me. So, our graduate coordinator definitely helped me tremendously.

Gabby also spoke of barriers she faced related to being successful compared to her peers. She recalled,

> As far success, that's being compared to others like my peers in other concentrations, I think they measure success by how many articles you write and how many conferences you go to, even grades. So, grades and conferences, yes. I have not published anything. I did not really get a lot of opportunities within our department to do so. I was working on

> something in other departments that didn't really pan out, and then I realized, you know what, I really don't want anything to do with academia, so it's fine. But I do think people do deem that as success, especially if you want to be a professor. You have to publish, but I haven't. I don't really care to. I felt like that was important at one time, and I kept running up against a wall there, and then I looked outside of my program and talked to other professors, and they are like, "Oh I'm working on this, and I'm working on that, you can help me with that." So open. But in our special ed. program, not so much. And then, there weren't that many multicultural professors doing things, one, that I was even interested in. The one that was left. I feel like that was my first year she left. So, the person that came in and replaced her, I wasn't interested in anything that was going on there. […] But my own level of success, yes. I feel like that's been good.

***Barriers related to academic successes.*** Participants were asked to share their views on barriers they faced specifically related to meeting the academic expectations of their program and institution.

***Academic expectations.*** None of the participants appeared to face any significant struggles with meeting common academic expectations such as attending classes and understanding how to complete assignments. However, three participants shared examples of how they did not feel academically competent at some point during their time as a doctoral student. Samantha begin by sharing how the program made her feel intellectually inferior at times. She admitted,

> I think it would be obvious that students in the doc program, or students accepted into a doc program, are exceptional students. I have not, at any point in my school career, been considered a student that doesn't work hard or that is unintelligent, or any of those things. And those are all things that I have felt in this program. That maybe it's just my own lack knowledge or lack of awareness, that maybe I'm not as good of a student as I think I am. So, I've asked lots of questions about how the academic landscape works, and really it seems like this is more built upon entrance to a club than it is about what you can contribute to this field and who you can become as a professional, or even as a researcher. […] Nobody ever talked to me about how you make it academia, or even that I could potentially apply and be successful in that sense. It just was almost like it was a moot point.

Gabby expressed similar reflections in describing her experiences with meeting academic expectations of her program. She shared that she did fine with the coursework; however, she began to experience difficulties once she reached the dissertation stage.

> I would say up until dissertation, I was fine. The graduate coordinator left, and I was pretty much left to my own devices at this point. I feel like so many things could have been done better. […] I was always behind the 8-ball as soon as I did the proposal. I didn't know that there was a timeline for when I need to get my dissertation to my committee before I can actually defend. […] I'm finding all of this stuff out. […] Like this is stuff that I should have known, but I didn't have anyone to tell me. And, I just had to figure it out.

***Financial factors.*** Adofo shared that she didn't feel as though she was currently experiencing any academic barriers other than those associated with having to work while in her program. She stated,

> I've had multiple jobs, so I couldn't really complete some of the stuff that I had to do because I've been working. I work constantly. I had to do an incomplete [class], but I handed in a paper for [class]. [Class] is going to be done, I guess, by the end of the summer. But, that was not because I was not academically capable of doing it, it's just that I didn't have time. I had to work, and this is not paying me at all. So, I need to do what pays me.

Samantha also brought up issues related to being a working professional and not having funding as a doctoral student. She explained,

> There is a lot that I didn't know before coming into the program. So, financial aid, fellowships, people investing in your work, I had no idea that that was something that made your spot in the program legitimate. So, when I came in, I wasn't offered any fellowships, I wasn't offered any grants. I wasn't offered any kind of funding to be in this program. And I had no idea that I was supposed to be. I had no idea that's how a school demonstrates that they are invested in you and invested in your work. I actually had another doc student tell me that who was a white male. Who just, plainly said that even though our school is notorious for not funding students the way that they should, or even the way that they do at Division Two or Division Three, or Tier Two or Tier Three universities, I had no idea that that's how people express that they were interested in you becoming a legitimate part of their peers, the college of academia. So, I came in not knowing that I should be asking for money or making sure that I was funded because I thought that it was well enough that I had decided on my own that I wanted to pursue education, and I wanted to make sure that I was the best and the brightest in my field. And I assumed that because I was accepted that that was mutually acknowledged, that they also thought that there was something there. I had no idea that funding was such a huge piece of that. And I feel like effectively the school has put up that barrier. And even though they have tried to address it here recently, that doesn't do anything for students who have been working in this program the whole time. If we're so underrepresented, if black and brown students are so hard to come by, I don't think there should be any cases where one of those students is not funded in some capacity. So, that's definitely a barrier

> […]. You are already a professional in the field, and you are coming out of that in the doctoral program and to work on your education. You're giving up income, you're giving up financial stability, and the school should at least provide you with some of that.

Of all of the participants, Bobbi had the most positive response related to her perception of her academic success. Unlike the other participants, she couldn't recall anything that negatively impacted her academic experience. She proudly shared,

> I've done very well with all of my classes. […] If it has to do with academic success, I haven't had any situations.

**Maintaining a healthy school/work/life balance.** Some existing research on the experiences of black women in doctoral programs has examined the challenges this population faces with regards to balancing the demands of being a student, an employee, and a member of a family.

***Barriers associated with balancing work and home related responsibilities.*** All of the participants in this study held jobs, either part-time or full-time during some point in their time as a doctoral student. Additionally, two of the participants were married and had family responsibilities that impacted their lives as students.

***Work and family demands.*** Samantha, who had previously discussed how much of a barrier the lack of funding was for her, shared how having to work full time for the duration of her program affected her. She disclosed,

> When I came into the program, everybody knew I was working full time. And again, nobody said this is practically impossible to do when you're working full time. Is there something else we can look at, so that you're still getting with you need experience wise […]? So, I only heard about jobs and positions and stuff within the school, or within the department from other students. I didn't have any professors say anything about that. And I think honestly, it would have been easier in the end. It's not like in my current job, I'm making money hand over fist, so it wouldn't have been a lot less money for me to take a GRA position, or a TA position, or something like that. That would have worked better, a little bit, with the school experience. But again, I didn't know, and I only found out stuff through word of mouth. So, that was a huge barrier that could have been avoided, if I had been able to map that stuff out in the beginning. Here are the way things normally go,

> here are the expectations, and here are some alternatives. Just to kind of create a good school experience from the start. […] I mean, obviously, I wasn't doing a ton of school work because of my full-time job and the nature of it. So, I felt stuck in that place because it was just me being stagnant not producing work either. And it felt like my attention was split way too far in each direction. So, I was either doing 100% at one thing, or 0% at the other, or flip flopping. So, that's why I ended up taking […] semester off, which kind of opened things up. But even still, that had to come completely under my own decision. I had to look at the affordability of it. And I didn't really have anything to supplement not getting paid at my full-time job […] while I've been trying to finish.

In addition to working full time, Samantha also shared experiences she had early on in the program that were related to meeting the demands of her home life. She reflected on how she took in some of her family members at the onset of the program without realizing what her workload was going to be. She shared,

> I basically didn't realize what the workload was even going to go look like, or what my home life was going to look like at that point, but I did it anyway. […] I was used to being really busy and doing a lot of work, so that part wasn't necessarily the most difficult because they do have our classes after work time. But just the level of assignments and thinking that I needed to take a bunch of classes right at the beginning kind of derailed me a little bit. So, if I had it to do all over again and had somebody really to help me map out how long it was really going to take in this program, I might not have front loaded so many classes.

Like Samantha, Bobbi shared challenges she faced with having to work part-time to support her family and take care of school demands. She mentioned,

> To get the work done is more challenging for me because I work […] during the day, So, I don't sleep as much as I hear people say that they sleep. I sleep less. It has been difficult combining a lot of that and school work, but I think that I just do what I have to do.

***Social life.*** Adofo and Gabby didn't have the same types of work and home related challenges that were expressed by the other participants. Adofo spoke of sacrificing so she could be a full-time student and take extra classes when she started her program. She mentioned how much of a negative impact doing so had on her social life, and she acknowledged that things may change for her as she advances to the next level of her program while also working. She admitted,

> I wanted to get in and out because I didn't want to stay in that environment. So, I made the sacrifice to be full time and do a lot of credits my first summer […] I didn't really have too much of a social life, per say, when I was there. I mean I would date or so. Up here, I have a lot more social life, but I'm definitely working on more. I have a social life because this is the environment that I choose to be in. It will definitely get a lot more intense once I start writing and doing the research for my dissertation, so I can image the work/life balance will be a lot more strained. Especially with all of the positions that I have.

Gabby's school/work/life balance appeared to be the least challenging of all of the participants. She described herself as not having a personal life and stated,

> I wasn't married, I wasn't in a relationship, I didn't have any kids. All I had was school. I had a great part time job […] that was very flexible. I was like secure with how much money I needed to make. I just didn't have any concerns.

***Barriers associated with career planning.*** When reflecting on their school/work/life balance, the participants also shared their perceptions about barriers related to planning for their future careers.

***Lack of support.*** The general consensus among all participants was that they did not receive adequate support with career planning in order to feel as though they had what they needed to be successful. Samantha shared,

> I also was not ever talked to about being in the academic landscape or being a viable candidate in academia. So, to me, the career planning portion was virtually non-existent, outside of my college teaching course. I think that I'm somebody who benefited a lot from my previous experiences in graduate school. So, even though our college has a career services component, or so I'm told, I've never seen it, or caught wind of it, or anything. Like I heard about it a few weeks ago. I had the advantage of having a career services center that is fully operational and tailored to the graduate experience, especially for doc students, in one of my former programs. […] So, I, in trying to anticipate how I would complete this program and what kind of jobs I wanted to get, or even how I would negotiate a different position within my district, went to the career services center […], and they were the ones that reviewed my resume, reviewed my cover letter, told me that I needed a statement of teaching philosophy. Basically, built a complete doc package for me, even though I'm not one of their doc students. Because their program is very prescriptive, and they wanted me, as an alumnus, to be able to also utilize those services. […] So, I went through a really rigorous process with them, where they spent one-on-one time with me. They do review and revise all of my items. They have relationships with people, so they will make phone calls on your behalf. They will advocate for you. And

> they spend a lot of time and energy just making sure you find something that's the right fit. […] I never got that in the College of Education.

***Professional plans.*** Gabby held similar sentiments as Samantha, and she attributed the barriers she faced with career planning to the fact that she had no intention of taking the traditional academic route for Ph.Ds. She explained,

> I felt a lot of pressure to go that route, but I made it very clear throughout this process, I had no interest in being in academia. I didn't feel like it was a space for me. But I also didn't feel like I had many options. I reached out to the career center. They really didn't have any options for people that didn't want to go into academia. They sent me a link to a website that the university pays for access for you to look at nontraditional jobs, but none of those things really fit what I was trying to do or were special ed. related. […] I ended up finding my own job on Indeed. I didn't feel like my program really talked a lot about what options you have if you don't want to be a professor because it's a Research I institution. […] And then even with me being the person saying, 'Yeah, no, I don't want academia,' all I got was, 'You should think about it. We really need women of color. You should think about it.' Like no.

When asked about her career planning prospects, Bobbi expressed that she felt there should be more mentoring towards the end of the program, but she wasn't sure where it was supposed to come from. She shared that she has witnessed how her friends at other schools receive support, but that she wasn't receiving that kind of support in her program. She pointed out,

> The kind of job I would like to get, or what's the next step, I don't think there is any support in that regard. Most times, I think all you are coming here to do is just to take classes and go figure out the other things yourself. […] I was really impressed with how far faculty can go to ensure that students succeed because that's the point of going through the program so that you can find a great placement someday, a nice job, and I don't see that here. I just feel like you're on your own, basically.

Adofo appeared to feel more confident about her post-graduate career options, likely because she felt more aware about the job market she would be entering, and she had a more entrepreneurial plan for her future. She theorized,

> I know I have options. The thing is that a Ph.D. in special ed. doesn't lead to financial success unless you do probably something entrepreneurial. It's not necessarily going to

> lead to another certification because I'm already certified in special ed. It's not going to grant me certain positions based on that. I know for a fact that I am not as proficient in networking, and I know that I'm, in many ways, probably oppositional to some people. I didn't have the high-powered advisor, I didn't create such relationships, or have co-authorships with people that could possibly put me in places where, I could have a great professorship or whatever. But that never was my goal, in many ways, to be a professor. I've told my professor. It doesn't pay when it comes down to it. You can make more money consulting. So, probably consulting will be the way I go. Starting my own consulting business because that's more lucrative, and it will probably give you a lot more time, in some respects, to control your schedule than to be a professor.

Adofo felt that she had deficits related to her ability to network and establish the types of relationships with faculty members that may have been more beneficial to her academic career. Adofo's self-reflection speak to an aspect of black feminist thought which describes how black women can become willing participants in their own oppression (Collins, 2009). All of the participants, in one way or another, mentioned ways in which they thought they were powerless to say or do something. These types of experiences possibly explain why there seemed to be a lack of agency among participants to speak up, speak out, or truly advocate to change the conditions they were experiencing.

**Positionality and relationships.** This study sought to examine the lived experiences of black women; therefore, it was important to closely evaluate how participants viewed their experiences based on their positionality as black women. Additionally, participants were also asked to reflect on the various types of relationships they encountered as students and as individuals outside of their institution.

***Positionality as black women doctoral students.*** When asked to describe how they would describe their experiences in their program to someone who was not a black woman, participants mostly provided advice that they would give to others based on what they didn't receive. They primarily focused on the lack of funding, the importance of advising, and the need to ensure the

program is a good fit. There was also a reoccurring theme of participants not wanting to speak too negatively about their experiences because of risks associated with either deterring people from pursuing a Ph.D. or making black women appear incapable of meeting the demands of the program. Samantha stated,

> I think the most important part to talk about would be funding. And it is true, you don't know how honest you should be about the whole thing because then somebody could be potentially walking away from the program saying nope, that's not for me. […] The direction of the program is about whatever they put out there. I'm like take it at face value. Look at the website, look at the faces, look at the research interests, and then, you know, try to walk them through pulling up an article to really see what it's about. I mean even when somebody is advertising their research interests and things, it doesn't necessarily translate over to that's what they are really championing in the program and what they are really focused on. So, I would say, critical, do your research, but then again, you kind of need to talk to somebody one-on-one, or have somebody be really honest with you if you're really, truly trying to get into this experience. Because it's not good to go into it with like 25% of the information.

Adofo said she would describe the experience as,

> It's a lot of reading, lot of work, lot of regurgitating information, and I don't know how real I would be with them, but I would say, of course, it's a cut in pay depending on what they are used to getting paid. […] I definitely would advise them on funding, and advisors, or making sure that their advisor would be staying at the institution for years and not leaving. But I think I would probably focus on financing and the demands of being a Ph.D. student.

Gabby shared,

> I would definitely sugarcoat it. Really try to make it seem like it was the most positive experience because if they're not like a woman of color, then I definitely don't want to come off just like I struggled in any way. We are totally capable, and I'm always cognizant of what people may try to do to other us. But, I definitely would tell them they want to really connect with an adviser who shares their research interests, that a lot of time is going to be spent doing reading and writing, and that you're not going to have much time for yourself. And, it's definitely really hard to hold down a full-time job if you want to graduate as soon as possible.

According to Collins (2009), others, or strangers, can be a threat to the moral and social order of society. Gabby's viewpoint reflects a theme found in black feminist thought that speaks

to how black women's roles as others is essential to society because their very exclusion from society places an emphasis on the significance of belonging.

Of all the responses, Bobbi's was the most general. She recalled a conversation she had with a peer who was not a black woman or man and simply surmised,

I just told the person it was stressful. It's a lot of work. A lot of work and commitment.

***Relationships with faculty and staff.*** The doctoral process is centered, in part, around close working relationships between doctoral students and their professors as well as interactions with various support staff. During the focus group, participants were asked to describe how they viewed their relationships with faculty and staff in their respective departments. Three of the four participants shared somewhat negative descriptions of their relationships with faculty; however, these same participants spoke very highly of one particular departmental staff member they all interacted with throughout their time in the program as well as faculty from other programs. Additionally, the three participants each attributed the challenges with relationships to issues connected to race and culture.

***Positive and negative relationship descriptions.*** Gabby described her most positive relationships as those that existed between her and faculty from outside of the special education department as well as with two members of her committee She shared,

> I feel that I made relationships with professors outside of my department quickly. I feel like those are people that if I needed to call on them, that they would genuinely be there. They have mentored me. Definitely, in the School of Ed, but not in our specific department, I've really made some good relationships. As far as people on my committee, I have relationships with two of my committee members that I feel are longstanding. One committee member is not in the department. She was the only person that really helped me with my methods section and edits, and came prepared to the dissertation with real suggestions. […] I had a professor that was on my committee because of their expertise in a specific disability that I was also researching, and I felt that professor gave a lot of insight and was willing to help me through the process. […] They really took over because I had no idea, I wasn't prepared. […] I'm happy that I built relationships with professors outside of my department. That kept me sane. That kept me interested in

> school. I took a good amount of classes outside my department as a result. I'm thankful that I did. I'm very happy that I picked the committee members that I did because they helped me several times.

She also spoke favorably about the graduate coordinator, which she relied on for advising and emotional support. She described this person glowingly,

> I can't even go into how important she was. Like a mother figure. Like everything I thought I was going to get with my adviser, I got with the graduate coordinator. When I was having a bad day, I would just come to her office, and say I just need a hug, I can't do it today. Just an all-around amazing person. She prepared students for the program. I like definitely owe my degree to her in so many regards. Because she was very knowledgeable and also understood that the students of color weren't getting the opportunities and wanted to kind of be the way to bridge that gap. Anything I found out about a GRA job or any kind of job, I found out through her. I never got GRA jobs or TA jobs, and I interviewed for a lot of them, but at least I had the opportunity to go and hear about them. I was able to get funding my first year, and I found out about that because of my graduate coordinator. So, I know I definitely would be lost.

Like Gabby, Adofo also shared how she felt like she had limited support from faculty, which she largely attributed to her blackness and lack of physical presence at the institution. She also spoke out about feelings of exploitation related to working for faculty and being representative of black perspectives. She recalled,

> I feel like I have no allies. For many different reasons. I don't think I had good interpersonal skills with the professors. I knew in some ways, of course, I would have to develop relationships, have some connections, but, I think so-called good intentioned white folks sometimes see me, they may think 'I take interest in her, but really, right now, it's out of sight, out of mind.' I'm just another negro who went there, and who's not there now. But also, I'm not the right type of black. They like a right type of black. I definitely don't fit that category. Some faculty were non-approachable. They were too busy with researching, and writing, and pandering to white folks. My best professor was in the […] department. But, sometimes they aren't approachable I think because they are at a high ranked, research university, they are just so busy doing whatever, that they don't necessarily make time, or you have a small time with them. Some were not approachable, some were, but they are busy, of course. Many don't care. So many of them don't care about you if they're not able to exploit you. So, I've removed that exploitation. Yeah, and of course, this is how we're supposed to do it. You're supposed to co-author, you're supposed to be on research committees, or whatever research plans, and do all these papers, and publish, and all that. So, I'm like I can go somewhere else, make more money, and I'm not being paid $10.00 an hour doing all your damn work. I'm not doing that. I don't care about, 'Oh you gotta do this, this, this, that and that.' I'm a worker, so I

> will always have a job. And I'm going to be an entrepreneur as well. So, I don't give a damn about your process, so you're not going to exploit me for peanuts. So, that's definitely something that I didn't subscribe to. And you're not going to benefit from my intellectual capacity to make yourself better. Because they always want to make it so that you're the black person speaking up in the group. You're not going to do that.

On the topic of the graduate coordinator, Adofo shared,

> She was wonderful. Always welcoming, always warm, always inviting. Definitely, she was a gem, a definite gem.

Samantha spoke at length about some uncomfortable experiences she had with faculty while trying to navigate the demands of completing her program. She specifically recalled how her department chair and members of her committee were unfamiliar with who she was. She also spoke about the impact of being fired from an assistantship had on her. She shared,

> Nobody recognized me. They had no idea what I was talking about when it came to my research. I had the department chair, as I'm trying to greet new students, look at me, and ask me in front of the entire group, Who's your adviser again? And I'm like, come on now, there is literally a handful of black people in this program, and by a handful, I mean a strict handful. So, how is it that, for one black face you have no idea who this person is? And of course, in front of new students. And I'm like, they should pick up on that, but I don't know if anybody did or not. I was upset about not getting research grants, or anything like research assistantships or anything. I was never considered for anything until my fourth year. And that was after me asking my peers about stuff, and just being like, let me put it out there. I have a full-time job, but I am trying to participate in this academic process. […] I was aware of what academia was like in that sense, and I totally agree with everything. It's exploitation. You're just using other people's work. You're using your student's fresh ideas to get you authorship going and to make sure that your research is going, and not necessarily in a good way. And it's not that every professor is doing that, but it is kind of the barometer for the standard of practice, at least in the College of Education. So, I let myself get sucked into something. I was like I've got to get something. I took the only one that was offered up to me, and for the first time in my life, I was fired from a job. […] I can't devote 40 hours a week for something that you're giving me $15 bucks an hour for 10 hours a week because I do have a full-time job. I was trying to participate in the process, and I put a lot of pressure on myself to produce exactly what this professor was asking for because I was getting a shot. But the professor has no idea that it was too heavy of a workload. It was too ambitious for the few weeks we were able to spend on it. I was beating myself up about it because even though I've never been fired before, I was fired, and I didn't know how to take that because I don't know how to not do good work.

In reflecting on the two prior experiences, Samantha went on to describe the emotional toll that the negative relationships with faculty in her department had on her, and she compared her experiences to positive interactions she had with faculty from a prior graduate program. She recalled,

> So, when it comes to the relationships, I had to take a step back this year and really look at it […] My experience when I got my […] was totally different. I had two years with those people, and those are relationships that I still have to this day. Ten years later, ten years after becoming a practitioner, those are people who still support me that I can go to and ask questions. One of those people is on my committee. But as far as the College of Ed., I've been here […] years, and I can probably only tell you a little bit about people. And really, it's not related to anything that's personal to them, nor could they tell you anything about me. I mean I sat at my proposal and had to spend a couple of minutes just talking about, you know, this is my professional background. […] This is what I do, this is where I'm from. And they're just looking at me because this is new information to all of them. They just have no idea. And it was so frustrating to be in that moment to say that I have spent all this time with all these people, and you realize, […] you know the script, you know who they're catering to, you know who it's supposed to be for, and you're still trying to actively participate in this. You're not trying to turn the other people off to this. But, you know, how do you keep putting people through this process? Because we come here for the faculty that's supposed to lead us, and when you don't get that, you're like okay, how are we supposed to be that ourselves, and also how do we address all of the emotions and feelings about what we've been through? You know there is disappointment, there is anger, there's stress, there's all kinds of stuff. And we know that we're valuable people. We're all brilliant practitioners in our regular lives, and that's taken with a grain of salt. Obviously, we got into this program because of how bright we are, so how come when we step foot through the door, it seems like that stuff seems to not matter to faculty. Our voice doesn't matter, our experiences doesn't matter. It's just to say, not even a diverse program. We have some black faces here.

Like Gabby and Adofo, Samantha had nothing but positive comments to share about the graduate coordinator she worked with. She went into detail and shared,

> She is responsible for my degree was well. […] When I talk about her, it's like, 'Oh, you know, she babied you guys.' And, it felt better hearing it in the positive. Just to hear somebody say she was a mother like figure to us, that she was good to us, and it's not being put in a negative way, saying that we were babied. I mean obviously, we're adults. We're professionals in a lot of aspects. It's okay for somebody to be supportive, and to be that close to us, and to be that personal with us. This is really what this experience requires. […] I think that she far exceeds the value that the university ever really put on her. I know that she was special, but I'm like throw as much money as her as you can, don't ever let her leave. Train somebody up after her, but even that, it's part of her

> personality. It takes personality to cultivate what she cultivated. It takes a special person to do it. In this big, old place, in this big old university, in this big, old school, you should be able to find somebody that has those qualities as well. Because it really is important to this process. And it's more important to the students of color who have not had the same opportunities. And for somebody to be able to recognize that, and to nurture your strengths but also support your journey. Make sure you know where you are going, but say, 'You're stronger than you think. It's okay to have a breakdown about stuff. It's okay to cry about this. It's okay to be upset.' All these things. Just hitting on all the points. Definitely when I get my diploma, I need to have a second copy made up and delivered to her doorstep.

Bobbi shared very little about her relationships with faculty members; however, her recollection of her experiences was also the only one that was largely positive. She simply described her experiences by stating,

> Within the department, I would say that, in terms of working with faculty, it's been good, and professional. I do this, and that's it. I get feedback, and that has been it. I've worked with a female professor before, and I'm currently working with a male professor. And it's been a good working relationship.

***Relationships with peers.*** Participants were asked to reflect on their relationships with their peers in their program, and they all spoke more favorably about the relationships they developed with colleagues in their cohort as well as other women of color.

***Colleagues and friends.*** When asked to speak about her peers, Bobbi distinguished between individuals she considered colleagues and those who she considered to be friends. Colleagues were described as individuals who could offer guidance and support related to navigating the program expectations, and her friends were those who she could relate to more about social and personal topics. She shared,

> There are some of my colleagues I can talk about anything else with. We can talk about movies, we can talk about life. And there are some, it's just related to class work, or related to research, and that's it. Also, I think every adult, you choose who you want to be friends with. You decide on the terms you want to be friends with and the terms you want to get into relationships with people. I think that has been my guiding principal. I have colleagues that are friends, and I have colleagues that are just colleagues. When I was in the process of doing my research mentoring, I got a lot of support from my colleagues just by asking them questions. For those that have done it before, they talk about their

> own experiences, which I thought was really helpful in preparing me. During my proposal, I also asked questions around how the experiences was for my colleagues that were a year or two ahead of me to, I asked about their experience, what they did, how they did it, and all of that. With regards to that, I think their support was really helpful.

***Peers of color.*** Like Bobbi, Gabby described her relationship with her peers as being mixed, and she also reflected on the differences in relationships with her peers that were based on gender and/or ethic identities. She also discussed the positive feelings she got from being able to support her peers as they go to the process and reach milestones that she already passed. She stated,

> When you start the first year as a cohort, you kind of get the feel out for who you want to associate with, who you don't. And a majority of the people either didn't have any experience or had experience teaching in places that were vastly different from where I taught, or where I'm even from. So, it was really hard to connect with them on a level. That first year, you find out people's research interests when you are doing projects, and it's become very clear what side of the fence your classmates are on when you present about the issues related to people of color. So, after year one, there's an amount of my peers that I don't associate with, as a result of how they present themselves related to issues surrounding people of color. But I will say that have good relationships with my peers of color in my class, in my cohort. I keep up with them any time I'm in […], I hang out with them. I talk to them, pretty much, on a monthly basis. They were there after researching mentoring, they were there after the proposal, they were there after the defense, taking me out, going for drinks. One of them is pregnant, I'm going to go see here when she has her baby. These are people that are going to be life-long friendships, and we forged those because we were in an environment that was so whitewashed in a way. Anybody that was a person of color that's interested in these types of issues, social justice, kind of stood out kind of like a sore thumb in our department, so I definitely felt supported by them. I was one of the first ones to finish, so me and another classmate are done. Two of them are not, but I feel supported by them emotionally. And now, I'm able to support them academically when they're preparing for proposal. I shared my PowerPoint so both of them can be prepared. I didn't have anyone to do that for me. I didn't have anyone to like guide me and say this is the kind of things they are going to ask. […] I've already been through the trenches with it. It's kind of good to be able to give back to them in a different way than what they gave me. I do wish I had that on the front end. I definitely have good relationships with three of my peers from my cohort that I would consider friends and I feel supported by.

Samantha shared similar sentiments as Gabby when describing the connections she had to her peers of color in the program. She also shared the benefits of being able to receive and give

support as part of a peer group, and she reflected on the impact of not being able to have this type of support could have on students in other cohorts. She stated,

> It's funny because as Gabby was talking, my immediate reaction to the question was, 'Oh man, I love my peers.' But as Gabby went through how her friend group evolved and everything, I realized that I do mean the people of color in my program and my cohort. I don't have any relationships with any white peers, so to speak. The person even that's included my cohort friend group considers herself, 'alternative white', honestly, because she feels really different from the white students in the program. At least with what she's shared. So, yeah. I would not have gotten through this program at all without my cohort behind me. We all share things. We all try to prep each other when somebody else has just gone through the phase that you're about to go through. Calling, texting, emailing back and forth. Those friendships are forged out of being in an environment that is stressful and sometimes toxic, where you don't always know what you're doing, and it doesn't always feel comfortable to ask somebody. Thank goodness, that there are some folks that you finally circulate around to and really build that relationship with. Because it is, honestly, I feel like it is for life, just like Gabby was saying. There are so few people that know how this experience really was, and then, to be that much closer to where you are open and honest with a circle of people who are doing the same thing. Everything feels a lot better when you are able to be honest and just say, 'This is hard, I don't know what I'm doing, I need to ask somebody.' And for somebody to respond to you and be like 'I can help you with this,' or be like 'I don't know either,' or whatever that affirms how you're doing. It does become very clear from your research, or how you talk in class, or what you choose to talk about what side of the fence you are on. As far as, being included where faculty includes you and likes you, and you're on that side of things. Unfortunately, I never felt like I was on that side of things, but I was on the positive side of my friend group and people who understood what I was doing and talked to me, and supported me, and gave me new ideas and new creative flow, and just a little bit of fire and stuff to be able to keep doing this. I mean, the relationships were good. It also makes me think of all the other cohorts and everybody else who is on a different pattern, or who are on a different part of the path than you are. It makes me wonder who's being left behind and what do you do about it. Because obviously we are experiencing things that should make us really tight as a group and cohesive, and I feel like there weren't a whole lot of opportunities for us to get together, just to like spread across different cohorts and be able to join together on that. You do have to be able to have front-end trust to be able to start that, too. So that makes it hard.

Adofo was likely the least connected of all of the participants. Possibly, due in part to her being largely removed from the institutional environment. She also expressed difficulties related to her racial identity that made it difficult for her to form relationships with peers in an academic setting. She stated,

> I don't talk to anyone. I don't have relationships with anyone. I will categorize some of my relationships with the peers as fake, and they use you for their benefit rather. And then also, some were very much crabs in a barrel. With the white counterparts, no I don't have any relationships with them. They wanted me. 'Oh, you need to teach me. Teach me about…Oh, you have some knowledge…Oh teach me'. Sometimes in class, this is very sponsored by a lot of the professors. 'Oh, culture, class, race was never one of my variables. Oh, I just didn't think about it.' I don't think I ever felt supported, and I felt that some folks that I had classes with, people of color, they separated from me. Not to be associated. They don't want to be with, I guess, the angry black girl in a class. So, they would move further and further away from me in the classroom as far as logistically. 'Oh, let me move five seats away from you instead of two'. So, no. I don't feel supported at all, and I don't talk to anyone.

***Relationships with family and friends.*** Participants were asked to reflect on challenges they faced in their personal relationships outside of school, and there were some commonalities in how these non-academic relationships were described. Some participants reflected on how relationships with family members and friends were strained as a result of being in a doctoral program. Samantha shared some of the frustrations she faced with her husband, family, and friends not understanding or being supportive of her pursuit of her degree. She also shared how the lack of understanding was also tied to her positionality as a black woman pursuing a doctoral degree. She shared,

> My work-life balance wasn't great before the Ph.D. program. This is something that I really wanted to pursue, so I didn't give it that much thought adding another thing. My friends are still the same. I'm the only Ph.D. student in my older friend groups, and I've made good relationships with people in my cohort. But for the most part, people I know are working professionals, and they are like, 'Why the heck are you doing this? And what purpose does this serve?' My husband, I can't say is too far off from that. He has a high school diploma. He never experienced college, doesn't really get the process or how difficult it is.

Samantha's experiences with her husband are common in the lived experiences of black women, particularly professional black women. In the black feminist thought framework, Collins (2009) wrote that when faced with being in a relationship with a black woman with a career, some men will take issue with their needs being deprioritized, and other men will interpret the

success of a black woman as an attack on them as men. In either case, there can be difficulties for black women doctoral students when their spouses or partners are unable to truly understand what they are doing and why. The same can also true for other types of personal relationships. Samantha also shared,

> And nobody in my family did either, or does understand it. So, I would say, my personal relationships were just like people weren't necessarily there to support me, and I could see that. And sometimes it was more of an obstacle than anything. You know having to explain to people, what you're doing with your time, and why you are pursuing this in the first place. And then it's like a double whammy because, no, you're not doing it to say I have a Ph.D. You're doing it because you think it's necessary, and somehow that seems like a perspective that women of color only understand. That something is really necessary to get where you're going, whether that happens to be true or not. […] It just made it 10 times harder to get through this program with all of your relationships in tack. Especially when you are stressed out or frustrated about something, or there are things that are beyond your control, and you are like 'I give up and I'm not trying to do this stuff.' And I will say that sometimes I'm a big avoider, too. […] I think that hinders personal relationships as well. Where I'm like I don't want to answer any questions about where I am in this process, I'm not hanging out with people, I'm not talking about it. Whatever.

***Loneliness.*** Adofo described how she felt lonely in the process, even though she mentioned having some friends to call on when she needed to. She said,

> I felt more lonely in the process. Because I hated […], every minute of it. And, of course, I didn't see the purpose of it, of this program. When it came down to it, when I realized what it was. [...] I wanted to be elsewhere, so that was definitely personal turmoil, with that respect. […] I definitely felt alone at the school. I have lived in many environments, so I know how to cope in lonely situations. But, I think my friends definitely had an earful of me complaining about the program, complaining about the students, and all those phone conversations. It's very different now because I'm not in the environment. It definitely felt lonely being in that environment and not relating to anyone.

Bobbi spoke about not really having friends because of the changes that have occurred in how she thinks during her time in the program. Like the other participants, she expressed feeling lonely and isolated as a doctoral student. She shared,

> There are times I think about my friends before I started the program. The beginning of the program and getting into it because of the rigor, because of the commitment, I realized that I can't keep up with some friendships. So, that's one part. On

> the other end, […] but I think researchers think in a way. The more I got into researching, my thinking became different. I won't say it is better than my friends who I left behind before I got into the program. But it made me think differently, and I couldn't stand some conversations. […] And at times, as a result, over the years, you realize all of a sudden you don't have a lot of friends again. And, that feeling of isolation, you can't laugh off some things again. You can't just take some truths. You have to question everything. And if you are used to having friends around, or people around you who just think everything. You are like, 'No, you can't think like that. You can't do that. You can't say that.' You realize that over time, naturally, the friendship won't work again. Just based on my own experience. I was sharing with another colleague at a conference in March. And she said the same thing. She doesn't have friends again; she feels really isolated, which was the same way I felt.

Bobbi's experiences with her friends is similar to a subtheme in black feminist thought which speaks to the challenges that black middle class women have when dealing with the demands of work and family in addition to engaging with black civil society (Collins, 2009). For Bobbi, who already didn't feel included and accepted by the white community, she also faced challenges engaging with the black community from which she came. As her knowledge increased, it separated her from her friends because she could no longer relate as easily as she could prior to beginning her doctoral studies. Gabby expressed more positive sentiments about her family and friend interactions as students. Gabby felt as though she was in a different situation from her peers due to her relationship status and her friend group consisting of other Ph.D. students. She shared,

> I may be in a different situation from most of my peers, but I don't have a family. I didn't have anyone I had to take care of. I was just having to take care of myself. So, personal relationships outside, not really. They weren't really affected. I got to […], I had a core friend group. Most of them were also Ph.D. students, so they understood. But, no. I think I'm like an anomaly. Most people have somebody that like lives at their house or something. If I ignored people, it didn't matter. If I didn't eat that day, it didn't matter. It was whatever. So, no. Nothing.

Although Gabby had a positive relationship with her friend group, she made no mention of having a spouse, partner, or significant other. She did not seem to have an issue with being alone.

***Feelings of inclusion.*** In reflecting on the various types of relationships participants had with faculty and their peers, there was also some discussion about the level of inclusion these black women felt in their respective departments and concentrations as well as in the larger institution.

***Departmental inclusion.*** Three out of four participants indicated that they did not feel included in their department, and each of those participants connected their lack of inclusion to being a woman and/or person of color. During the focus group, Samantha started the discussion on this topic by stating how she didn't feel included and actually felt more welcomed by other departments. She stated,

> I definitely don't feel included within my department. And again, that experience is toppled by all of the other graduate experiences I've had, or school experiences period at the university level. […] I took classes in […], and I had both peers in that group and professors say, 'Oh why don't you switch over to us? You're not too far into the program, why don't you switch over to our program?' It just seemed like a much more welcoming atmosphere. I can't put my finger on exactly what they do differently, other than culture was addressed in every class, or at least the classes I was able to take anyway. They cultivated a bigger sense of it. Rather than for us, where they put a label on something and then nobody talks about it. They leave it to the students to bring it up, and if none of us in multicultural say anything, they're like 'Okay, I guess we can move on.' Because we are looked to as the spokespeople. […] I took a bunch of classes where I was the only person of color in that class, period. And then you go around and you introduce yourself, and you're like what's your area, you're also the only multicultural person. So again, you're hit with a double label, and you're having to represent your area within this bigger context as well as having to represent yourself as the only black person. I think about that, and I'm like that's aggravating. Not only do you not feel included, you sometimes have the spotlight on you inappropriately.

Adofo also shared that she didn't feel included in the department either, and like Samantha, she spoke of being more welcomed by professors in other departments. She also alluded to challenges she faced with using her student voice when it came to discussions about race. She shared,

> I don't think I felt included within the department. I definitely saw more of a safe haven in […], some classes in […], and also the class I took at the […] department. I definitely forced my inclusion in classes as far as using my student voice on talking about different issues of race. I definitely was that person talking about those issues. You can't glide by little slick comments. I was that person you wouldn't be able to get by with certain things in the classroom with me. I don't think I felt included at all. It was more of definitely me reaching out to people, rather than people reaching out to me. When people reached out to me, it was more for exploitation.

Collins (2009) discussed the challenges that can come about when black women fail to model socially appropriate behavior that is typically expected of their gender. When black women display such behaviors, their assertiveness can be weaken when they are labeled as being too strong or unfeminine. Adofo, despite the potential to be devalued and excluded by her peers, used her voice as a black woman to speak up and speak out about issues that were of importance and relevance to her as a black woman. Gabby attributed her lack of inclusion in the department to being a person of color as well as structural issues with her department and specific concentration. She also sought out opportunities in other departments, which described as being beneficial to her. She stated,

> I didn't feel included in the department, and I think that has a lot to do with being a person of color, and also being in the wrong concentration. I came into the concentration based on my adviser and based on what I saw on the website. And I showed up, and everything was completely different. The concentration was in transition, and not in a good way. I had a professor that I got to take one class with that was pretty good, but then they left. I got a new professor that I don't even understand how it fits in the concentration. […] I spent a lot of time outside of the department. I really found opportunities in […]. I didn't author anything, but I spent a lot of time with some professors over there who were just really willing to teach me things. I was interested in qualitative research. I got really close with my professors that did that type of work in other departments. I did qualitative work for my dissertation. Our department is weak in that area, so I really latched on over there. I had professors show me how to do surveys with Qualtrics and how to really dig into SPSS. These people were not in the Special Ed. department, and they just took their time and said 'Hey, sure I'll show you this is how to do it, come by these times, and I'll help you.' So, I really felt like I learned a lot to help me from other professors. I didn't feel completely included in my department. I did not feel included in my concentration because technically there wasn't really a concentration. Especially when I started, we didn't know what was going to happen the next year. Was

> it still going to be standing? Who was going to teach the required courses? A lot of turmoil. So, no, the foundation was weak in that concentration.

Bobbi's recollection of her inclusion in her program was positive, largely due to its small size. She shared,

> My program is very small. […] I feel included in my program actually because of things that I help with. I help with classes, with master level classes in my program. I help with the planning at times.

***Institutional inclusion.*** When reflecting on feelings of inclusion in the larger institution, all four participants indicated that they did not feel included in the university. Samantha and Adofo reflected on the impact of being older students who lived away from the university community and not wanting to socialize. Adofo stated,

> I didn't feel included so much because one, I was an older student. I kind of always felt like why am I here? I'm not part of the 20s crew. I definitely felt like an older person in a school of younger folk. So, I didn't feel included. I was always a commuter student, too, with all my undergraduate and grad, so I didn't want to live near […]. I did live in […], but more towards […]. I didn't want to be a part of the community because I just felt older, and just a different generation in some respects. I didn't feel really included so much, and also the variables of not being married, not having children. That's another element when you get older, everyone definitely separates themselves. I don't think I forged community, too, as well. I just didn't want to go to things. I had readings to do, I had work to do. I just wanted to leave. Like, as soon as class was done, I was the first person out the door.

Like Adofo, Samantha shared,

> I have no real idea of what black […] is like because I wasn't here for undergrad. I went into the doc program knowing that I commute, I live in the suburbs. I had commuted for the last two graduate programs that I have done, and I have been disconnected from the school, in that sense, for the last 10 years. […] I am an older student. I'm not part of the 20s crew either. So, people are like 'We're going to happy hour,' or this, that, or whatever. I didn't have a lot of confidence that I wouldn't be the only black person there. Second, I feel like, I'd rather go with somebody that's more familiar to me, or whatever else. And it's not like many of us have a whole lot of interest in showing up to some of the stuff. I think I was already disconnected, and I mean obviously, being new, just doubles it.

Samantha also spoke about the pride she has for the institution, but how she was also faced with the challenge of promoting it due to her negative experiences. She shared,

> I have enormous pride when people talk about […] and […] and everything. I have that coupled with the anxiety in my stomach about what this experience has been like. Because this has been the hardest degree, it's been the most difficult experience. It's been totally unlike my other graduate experiences. And I have love for this school, but I'm like do I really have to take the rotten part of it to? Please don't tell me I have to say great things about this program because I don't want to have to do that. I would just rather make this a better experience for other students. I don't want to have to mince words about what this has been like because it's been real ugly. I don't want that for other people.

Gabby spoke about trying to connect with the larger campus community, particularly the black community; however, her efforts ended up leading to more negative experiences. She explained,

> My first year, I did really make an effort to connect with the community. I did Black Grad Student Association. I went to a lot of meetings. […] I quickly realized that a lot of the people that are grad students have gone to […] This is a close-knit circle, so these people know each other. I was brand new to […], I did not graduate from […], and I did not fit in. I went to […] with another friend, and we were not well-received. I thought that was awkward. I was like, 'You went here, you should know that black people on this campus are like the severe minority. Why are you not welcoming?' It's bad enough being an outsider, and not being a […], or not being a […] for how many years. You can doubly forget about it. It was really hard to become a part of the community, so I stopped going to those Black Grad Student Association meetings. […] The first year, I had season tickets to the football games. I stopped going. […] I go to […] and I go home because I really made an effort the first year, and it was not well-received.

Gabby's experience with the Black Graduate Student Association is not an atypical one. Collins (2009) discussed how organizations that are intended to benefit the black community can still be oppressive to women. Although Gabby could not provide any reason as to why she was excluded by other black graduate students, it is possible that factors such as her gender, her background, and/or her social status among the students could have all been factors. Bobbi did not feel included in the larger institution either, and she attributed it to the overall institution and the College of Education not being designed to make anyone feel included. She described an

example of another graduate program at the institution that facilitated events for doctoral students to connect, and she recommended it as something the College of Education should adopt. She stated,

> Honestly, I don't feel really included, and I don't feel that um […] is, or the College of Education is designed to make anyone feel included. For example, [...] it was a small program, maybe like less than 15 doc students, lots of master's students, and they had this thing that I thought was really good. Everyone knew each other, and they used to have meetings and get togethers. They had something they used to call Fridays at 2:00. And Fridays at 2:00 is a student-led program, where everyone attends on Fridays at 2:00 pm. At the beginning of every semester, they have leaders, doc students, master's students, that would lead the program for the semester. They have different themes, different research. They used to go to the chair of their program's house two times. So, the faculty would host their end of the year party at their homes, and everyone would be very happy. It was really good energy. The kind of energy I would want to have, but I feel like the College of Ed. is not a place where I get that energy, or where I get the sense that I belong. For me, I just think it's a place where I take classes because I have to, see a few professors, do my GRA, and then check out. I think that there are a lot of benefits in having the kind of thing I described.

**Positive reflections and systems of support.** Despite discussing a number of challenges and barriers throughout the course of this study, participants were also able to share some positive reflections about their experiences. Additionally, in talking through their difficulties, they were also able to identify systems of support that were helpful to their perseverance and that could be helpful for other black women like them.

***Positive reflections on relationships.*** When asked to talk the positive experiences they encountered in pursuit of their degrees, three participants spoke about the benefit of the relationships they formed with their peers. Bobbi explained,

> Meeting people from other countries; learning together. That gets really exciting. I feel like people from other countries are more welcoming.

Samantha also found that the students she interaction with were a positive part of her doctoral experience. She said,

> The first, most positive, thing is very much the relationships that I have with people. Not with the faculty, or staff, or anybody at the school, but with my peers, with the other students. I feel very fortunate to have come in with the cohort that I came in with. That these are people that are very like-minded, and that work hard for me. Not necessarily just for this research, or for what we were intending to do, but we work hard for each other. We try to help each other out and support each other because we know that this is not an easy process. We are also somewhat aware that this is not how the process is supposed to go. So, we're really there for each other.

Gabby referenced her cohort members as being a positive part of her experience as a doctoral student. When asked to talk about her most positive experiences, she shared,

> I think meeting my cohort members. I'm still close with three of them. Definitely they were my life lines in so many ways. One of them made sure I graduated. God bless her. So, we defiantly keep in touch. And it's nice to have people who understand what you're going through. On so many levels being people of color, being in this program, being away from home and having to start all over again. That's really positive to say I met them.

Bobbi found her experiences with faculty to also be positive. She shared,

> Also, some of the faculty here have very supportive of my work and my growth.

Samantha also shared how she was able to view some of her relationship with faculty as a positive part of her doctoral experience. She shared,

> I have had a few professors that have made me feel like my research ideas and my thought processes are worth it. Dr. […] has been really supportive and was somebody that genuinely did look at my work in the program and in their class, that gave me more ideas, that tried to give me some feedback on what was okay and what wasn't so okay. Even though I had a professor where the experience was somewhat negative, it turned into a positive now. Dr. […] was the only person that ever offered me a graduate assistantship. I was able to take it, and the negative part of that is that they did have to terminate me after just a few weeks. […] But really, it came down to the expectations of academia that you put in four or five times as much work as you are actually assigned. So, they assigned me 10 hours, but I should have been working 40 hours on projects, and I couldn't do that because I still had a full-time job. In the end, I did produce work for them because I didn't want to end it on the bad note. Which I think improved our relationship later, that I didn't just leave it, you know, for them to figure out. […] So, I did give them a product in the end. So, that's turned into a positive now because they are willing really to help me finish this process and try to look at things, give me revisions, steer me in the right direction, answer my questions, as best they can for the work I'm doing.

***Positive learning experiences.*** Participants also shared that they did have some positive learning experiences that they believed would benefit them in the future. On the topic of the learning experiences, Bobbi shared,

> The classes, some of them have been very good. At times, I feel like you take some classes and you get excited about the things you learn because you feel like it is really applicable. I'll take that as positive, on that end.

Samantha found of her classes to be particularly impactful to her learning. She shared,

> Another positive really was my college teaching class because it kind of got me more organized. It reorganized my thoughts about what I should be doing, what I should be looking at, and how I should present myself when I'm looking for all of these options about work and research, and just being somebody who legitimately contributes to the academy. That was a really positive experience. That was a very organized professor, that I felt like I developed a good relationship with in just a semester.

Gabby also shared about the positive impact being a doctoral student had on her learning and future career. She stated,

> I thought I've learned so much. I really learned how to be a researcher, which is an invaluable tool in my field. I'm 100% positive that I have the job I have now because I was in this program. I am so young and young in the field. I don't think anyone would have said, 'Yeah you should be in charge of special ed. for eight or nine schools if I wasn't finishing my Ph.D. at one of the top schools in the country. So, that's definitely a positive.

Although Adofo didn't mention any positive experiences related to building relationships with peers or faculty, she did share positive takeaways related to what she learned as a student. She also placed value in having time away from working in a K -12 school that she used to travel. She expressed,

> The things that was positive was the time that I had probably to travel. I had a month off, you know between fall and spring. I had more time off that I would being at a K to 12 school if I was just teaching. That was positive. Also, I did learn a lot. It got me to reading and writing more. So, that's positive. And then learning to research. This has probably afforded me the opportunity to kind of consult. I could have gone into consulting and I did have some opportunities before getting into the Ph.D. program to do that, but it definitely opened the door to allow me to do that now. And also adjuncting now like I'm doing. It was positive as far as me learning more research because my

> previous institution was more of a teaching institution, and it didn't heavily focus on research. I definitely leaned more of the value of research after being at […].

***Systems of support.*** In addition to reflecting on the positive takeaways from their experiences as black women doctoral students, participants were also asked to share descriptions of their coping mechanisms and support systems that have been used to help them overcome challenges, barriers, and stressful situations.

***Copping with stress.*** When asked to share how they addressed challenges and/or coped with stress, participants each provided varying responses. Samantha discussed how she took advice from the focus group and changed her approach to communicating with her committee. She shared,

> I did still try to change it up a little bit. I'm going to be more communicative, I'm going to keep to these deadlines, and, you know, try to really finish strong in this

Samantha also shared simple ways that she copes with stress. She stated,

> Sometimes you do things like take a bath, or you know, totally avoid work and read a book that's not related. But at the same time, it's just increasing your stress level later. So, yeah. I'm still working on the stressful coping mechanisms.

For Gabby, she was able to address her challenges and barriers by relying on her colleagues for support and information. As for coping mechanisms to deal with stress, she shared,

> I eat food. I eat whatever I want because being a doc student is extremely stressful.

Bobbi expressed that she addressed challenges related to balancing all of the time demands by being proactive about getting feedback, scheduling meetings, and meeting deadlines. She also said she addressed the financial challenges by getting a job. She recalled,

> I had to be on my toes to schedule meetings. For example, with my supervisor, I had to make sure that I was getting feedback, sending out reminders. Those are the things that I have done with regards to challenges. My financial challenge […] Luckily, I've been able to get jobs as a GRA which helps pay part of my tuition.

In discussing her strategies for dealing with stress, Bobbi mentioned her use of an organizer to stay on top of her daily responsibilities. She also shared that she used to exercise; however, she could no longer do it because of the time demands. She said,

> With regards to how I cope, I just survive one day at a time. […] I have like an organizer, and a reminder, and there's an app on my phone. I use it to remind me of stuff that are due, of meetings because I have challenges with that. Also, keeping up with the meetings with my GRA work. There was a time I used to exercise on campus. I signed up for a program called Get Fit because I was stressed, and I thought that joining a program that requires that I attend three times a week would help me cope with stress. I joined that program, and it was helpful. But when it was time to start writing my qualifying exam, I could not afford the one hour. I look back and I wish that I continued going because that really helped my mind. And the time I was spending there really helped, and I would feel refreshed. When I started writing, I would think that okay, I need to put that one hour into my writing because the day is going to go by fast. […] I stopped going, and things also became worse.

When asked to share specific actions she was taking to address challenges she was currently facing, Adofo, said there wasn't anything that she was doing. She did; however, mention that she coped by working. She stated,

> I have three part-time jobs right now, so I work my jobs. I avoid it. I'm not in the environment, so I don't necessarily think about it until it's time to think about it.

***Support systems.*** In an effort to get a clear understanding of what black women doctoral students need to be successful in pursuit of their degrees, participants were asked to provide their thoughts on what supports could be helpful for women like themselves. All four participants mentioned the need for some type of diversity and mentoring within their program, although the descriptions of what was needed varied to some degree. On the topic of faculty, Samantha stated the need for stronger mentorship and faculty that have the capacity to support black women. She also suggested that given their propensity to be practitioners, black women could benefit from placing value on their professional experiences and connecting with them opportunities. She shared,

> We are a collectivist culture. We're there to take care of each other, we're there to have community with each other, we try to engage with each other on most levels, so if there was more of a sense of mentorship, that perhaps that didn't rest on solely one person, that would be beneficial to black women in these programs. You need faculty that is willing to engage with black women that are not afraid. […] Not standoffish when it comes to engaging with black women. I do feel like the professors hesitate to get to know you and they don't realize that it's the unconscious bias that's coming out. Because our interests are wide, and our experiences are varied, and there's plenty of things that they could engage with us on. And sometimes they can and do. They just need to take an extra step in knowing that we are not offered opportunities, or we don't know that opportunities exist on the same level.

Samantha also expressed a need for black women in special education to blend their roles as practitioners, researchers, and professionals as a means to impact change for students and faculty members to improve the program. As someone who expressed interest in going into academia upon completion of her degree, Samantha's views reflected an element of black feminist thought which states that black women community activists can be motivated to do so in response to things that occurred within their communities. She shared,

> And then I think that it would also be helpful for black women in the special education program to have an opportunity to blur the lines between practitioner, researcher, professional, to just lend to how rich this experience can be, not just for the students, but also for the faculty. There's a lot to know from people coming out from the field into research. So, if there is there a little bit less attention devoted to their own research, you do one less article so that you can spend two years with a student. That kind of exchange would really improve these programs. The last point is just that I think that black women need more connection with opportunities beyond the program. I mean everybody would like to come out and get a better job, or a job period, whether it is practicing or in academia. I think that's an area of real weakness right now. There're no connections being made. There's very little work that happens that you didn't have to do yourself. And so, again, if that was spread out among faculty. If more people were taking that on, that would be something that would definitely improve the success of the program, and the success of these students.

Gabby provided insight on the type of professors that are needed in her program to better support black women. She also shared her thoughts on non-academic programmatic elements

that could be helpful for students based on the experiences of a colleague in another doctoral program at the same institution. She advised,

> I think it would be helpful to have more professors of color in the program. I know that I felt much more comfortable in other departments just because I didn't stick out so much as a sore thumb. There were professors I could go to that understood my experience and that I was struggling. And being able to have professors that look like you is very important. I think that is big. They definitely need to recruit for more professors of color. More opportunities for students to connect. The first year, they had us all in the same class. I remember there was an orientation. I got to meet everybody, but after that, there weren't any times to come like come together as like a special ed. Department. So, it's hard. And then, depending on what year you're in, you're only seeing people in your year, or in one above. So, you don't get that connected. I think it would be nice as the department, if they had outings as group. My best friend is getting her Ph.D., and she's in the […]. They do these outings on a monthly basis, and a professor hosts them. They go to happy hour. Professors have had classmates over. So, she's a woman of color and is able to really develop a connection with her colleagues on a completely different level than I did. And it was so much easier for her to feel acclimated. I was like I wish we did stuff like that. I wish our professors were really that involved with us and that the department encouraged those types of things. They would really spend a lot of time developing relationships between professors and students, and the students amongst themselves. I think those two things, more people of color, in general, students, too, and professors would be a big deal. And opportunities to really network and connect.

Adofo shared that black women doctoral students like herself need allies in order to be successful. She described allies as being individuals who would have similar interests as students, who want to do the type of research students are interested in, and who will look out for students of color. She also provided things students should look for when looking to determine if a department will be a good fit. She shared,

> They need allies. They need to know that someone in their department will research who they want to research. They should seek out schools that have a vested interest in people of color. [...] And then, maybe just their interests. What they are interested in. You have other people around who are interested in the same things. […] And then also, make sure that your advisor is staying your whole doctoral program, and not leaving like mine did after a semester. So, they need allies. They need mentors, but they need people who have, who will look out for black students. There's a lot who don't look out for black students at all. They could care less about you. And then the thing is, with this program, if you had a black face, automatically you're in multicultural special ed. As if, you don't know anything else. And that kind of typecasts you. Like if you don't know anything about the disability categories. You only know about black folks, or Latinos, or Asians, or

> whatever. So, I would say, looking for a department that has cohesion. That has your best interest in mind. Do they graduate a lot of students of color? Are they highly published? Do many people on the department research people of color, or is it just only one person? So, you have to have allies. You have to have people who have interest in black folks, other than one person in the department.

Bobbi shared that she believed black women needed more supports in the form of things that reflect their values. She shared,

> I think more supports, generally, more classes that reflect their values, that reflect the kind of research they are interested in. […] More things that reflect who they are, because, the difference between who you are, what you believe in, what your values are. […] What you're learning can be stressful if you do not really see yourself in things that are being taught.

Although three for the participants discussed the lack of funding and/or having to work while in school as a barrier, only one participant explicitly mentioned funding as a key recommendation when providing their thoughts on what black women need to be successful in doctoral programs. Samantha felt strongly that funding should be offered to ethic people who were pursing Ph.Ds. She stated,

> I don't think there should be an ethnic person in a doctoral program that is not fully funded. That seems completely bizarre to me. We are so few of the Ph.Ds., it just seems bizarre that you would not find money to make sure you have the diversity. It is the box that they check, but it is just that bit of extra. Second, you know that you're getting brilliant candidates because you have to be a lot more brilliant to get into these programs anyway. We're still stuck in the antiquated mindset of you have to be twice as good. Twice is probably putting it lightly.

In the black feminist thought framework, the lack of equity in pay for black women is discussed at length. Collins (2009) discussed how black women have historically been exploited economically, and they either earn less money for doing the same amount of work as other race/gender combinations, or they have to work twice as hard as others to earn the same amount of income. The experiences and viewpoints of the participants illustrate that this also occurs in the academic setting where highly qualified and experienced black women doctoral students received little to no funding from their programs.

Both Adofo and Bobbi described the negative effects of having to work on their experiences as doctoral students, but neither of them shared specific thoughts on funding as a means for helping black women.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question sought to identify what factors motivated black women to pursue doctoral degrees in special education as a means to better understand how to enhance the pipeline of black women in this niche field of the academy. Participants were asked to reflect on three topical areas and common themes were analyzed for each. The topical themes were:

- Overall Reasons for Pursuing a Degree
- Motivating Factors for Continued Pursuit of a Degree
- Impact of Doctoral Experiences on Future Roles

**Overall reasons for pursuing a degree.** Two of the initial questions that were asked of participants at the start of the study were related to their reasons for pursing a special education degree and their professional plans for after they finished their program. All four participants had different reasons for entering into their respective programs, and there were also significant variations in responses related to their post-graduate plans.

***Practitioner skills.*** Samantha viewed obtaining a doctorate to gain more insight into problems she observed in her role as practitioner. She also expressed future plans related to either working in a school district setting or becoming a professor. She shared,

> I thought that this would be a good way for me to learn about the nuances of special education, but also to try to tackle a problem that I was seeing with disproportionality and practice.

When asked about her plans after finishing her degree, Samantha stated,

> Well, my original plan was to continue working for my school district and work on the programing and policy side. Just to help with special education and MTSS, which are two

> different departments. Kind of meld what they are doing with special attention to children of color, since our district is mostly ethnic. What I think I will be doing instead is actually leaving the district to work in the government sector, or potentially go back to […] as a professor.

***Advocacy.*** Gabby's motivations for pursing her degree were related to wanting to advocate for children. She shared that after teaching and obtaining a masters, she would need a Ph.D. to advocate on a bigger scale. When asked to share her career plans, she indicated that she was already in her dream job as a district special education coordinator. However; she also alluded to the possibility of doing other things during the first interview and the follow up interview. She stated,

> I am currently working kind of in my dream job. I'm a full-time, special education coordinator for elementary schools in a school district that is known for being high achieving. We're also known for really taking good care of our special ed. students with high needs. So, I feel like on a daily basis, I have eight elementary schools that I'm in charge of. I'll have nine next year, and I'm really happy in that position. This is kind of what I wanted to be doing. In the schools making change, coaching teachers, leading professional development. I'm doing what I wanted to be doing. I think maybe years later, I'll probably get into some consulting, or be like an advocate for parents.

Bobbi's motivations for pursing a doctorate in special education were centered around her experiences being from a place where there were limited services for people with disabilities. She spoke of volunteering with organizations that inspired her to pursue a master's degree. During her master's coursework, she became interested in research and investigating strategies for improving outcomes, so she decided to pursue a Ph.D. to be able to research and train people with similar interests as her. When asked about her plans once she finished her program, Bobbi shared,

> I'm really passionate about conducting research. I hope to continue with that. […] I like teaching, too. So, that's a good option, too. Hopefully, to become a researcher slash university professor someday.

***Uncertainty.*** Adofo, presented as being the most atypical of the participants. When asked to share her reasons for starting a doctoral program, she described it as being a big mistake. She shared,

> I really have no reason to pursue to this. It was actually a very big mistake to pursue it. To be honest, I was dared to apply for a Ph.D. program. I got in, and I followed through with it. […] A friend just dared me. She said, "Oh, you know you always wanted to do it." And I just ended up doing it. I think it was deterring me from working full time again, so that was a way for me to prolong going to back into the school system. But it was a very big mistake for doing it.

Adofo's post-graduation plans were also the most atypical of the participants. She stated,

> I'll probably consult. I don't know if I'll do full time professorship because it really doesn't pay much money. But probably consulting.

**Motivating factors for continued pursuit of a degree.** As participants shared their various barriers while going through the program, they were also asked to reflect on what motivated them to persist through the challenges.

***Personal driving forces.*** Each participant shared some sort of personal, driving force that caused them to persist. Samantha stated,

> I'm too far in at this point. I think that when I really caught on to how much difficulty I was experiencing, I was already four years into the program. And in my mind, I thought that just one more year and I would be finished. And instead, it's two years later, and I'm still scrambling to finish. […] So, I am too far in, and I also don't really understand what it would be like not to finish. I've never been incomplete in any program. I've gotten a few degrees at this point, and even though it's been difficult, these processes have been difficult, it's never been that I've genuinely thought that I wasn't going to finish.

Gabby mentioned the influence of her family and the people she would have to potential to help with the status obtained from holding a doctorate. She recalled,

> I didn't want to give up, and I knew I just had to finish even though there were so many times when it looked like I wasn't going to. Or, I had no idea how I was going to. I knew I had to do this for my family. […] I knew I had to do this for the people that I have the potential to help if I have this status because I need this status to be able to make change

> on a big level. So, that's really what pushed me. I knew if I didn't finish, I'm not going to be able to have the platform I need. So, that's what's driving me.

Adofo shared how she was going to finish for herself, but also for other people, particularly her friends, who have been motivating her throughout this process. She stated,

> Probably what would motivate me is just to finish it. Just to say I finished it, versus just to say, 'Oh I would continue.' I just did something and not finish it. I think probably other people will motivate me because of friends who were a bit of my guidance throughout this time I was at […] I would probably do it more so for them. But right now, this program is not getting me smarter in no way, shape, or form. It's a piece of paper, from I don't really see any benefit to it, but you know, I'll do it, just to say I finished it.

***Sacrifices.*** Bobbi's personal motivations stemmed from the sacrifices she made to pursue her degree. She reflected on the personal costs, but she also shared that she enjoys what she is doing and can see the benefit of her work. She shared,

> In the past it's my, the amount of things I've had to sacrifice to be here. The people I left behind back home. Apart from that, is the fact that I just enjoy what I do. I believe that a lot of changes need to be made with the population that we work with people with disabilities, and I believe that government policies, practitioners can do better. And one of the ways we can help do that is by creating knowledge and identifying gaps. Like we are doing to make things better. So, I enjoy doing research. I also get motivated from, personal stuff.

***Finances.*** Financial motivators were also mentioned by some participants. When reflecting on feeling like she was not going to finish the program, Samantha shared,

> I've had that feeling a lot of times in this program, and finances also have stopped me from doing that. I don't want to have to pay for a degree that has not garnered me anything. I've spent six years in the program, and to not have it at this point seems ridiculous. But, I do know that I'm paying for this experience, and that has somewhat kind of set a fire under me to just go ahead and finish. Because I'm going to be responsible for the tab at the end of the day. I didn't know going in that it would be this and cost me this. But at this point, I'm at a price point now with the degree, that I would need to make six figures just to pay it off. And who knows if there's any six-figure jobs I can get, at this point.

Gabby also stated that she had financial motivations for completing her degree. She stated,

> I knew I had to do this for me because I'm paying for it.

On the topic of paying for school, Adofo spoke about how paying for classes has recently motivated her to turn work in. She shared,

> Definitely what motivated me to send in that […] paper was the money that I spent on the course because I wouldn't have done it otherwise. And what would motivate me now to finish […] B is because of the money. I want the credit.

**Impact of doctoral experiences on future roles.** In addition to being asked to share their future career plans, participants were also asked to discuss how their experiences as doctoral students would impact them as professionals, practitioners, and/or academicians.

***Academic endeavors.*** Two participants expressed that they were going in to academia after earning their doctorates, and both of them reflected on how their experiences as students will shape their practices as professors. Samantha provided a rich description of how she envisioned herself as a mentor to her future students. She also described her return to her original motivations for going to graduate school to help black students and students who needed help. She shared,

> Because I am going into academia, I think that, if I'm being honest, I'm going to be carrying this experience for twice as long as I was in it. It's like, what do they say? A bad breakup. You're just constantly going over what was wrong, what you did wrong, what you could have done differently, and you spend very little time thinking about your successes and the things that were good. […] I think that this experience has definitely changed a lot of the things that I'm going to be doing professionally. I understand my role as a mentor better, but also to try to create some mentor alliances. If my students can't come to me, there are other people that they can come to and connect with to make sure they have those types of relationships. My program will be set up in a cohort system, so, I need them to understand that this is their place and their time. They elected to come to school regardless of funding, regardless of who is paying for this experience. That they do have other things going on, that this is something that they've chosen to embark on out of interest, out of compulsion, out of whatever. They worked hard to get into the program, they worked hard to get into the classroom, and they are going to have to work hard out in the field and in their professional practice. So, acknowledging that this school, this college, is supposed to be their safe haven, I think, will go a long way. That's something that is at the top of my list to make sure that they understand. That this experience is theirs and that I'm there to facilitate that.

Collins (2009) wrote about the ways in which systems within the U.S. have placed and kept black women at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Because they are facing a number of oppressive systems in all facets of life, black women have also worked and fought to create their own identities as histories to address the injustices perpetuated against them. Samantha, for example, also spoke about the need to address systemic issues related to student experiences in her future career. She stated,

> I think that, you know, my biggest takeaway from the whole thing is that I honestly want to be there for my students. And if I can't be there for my students, I want them to understand this process. How this structure is laid out, the organizational structure. And then if they want to buck the system, that's what we do. In the pursuit of social justice, yes, sometimes you do have to fight for yourself and fight to change the structure that exists. […] I think, it's just, it changed how I want to go into this next professional life. Because I'm going back to my original purpose of going to graduate school and getting involved at the university level. My original perspective was so that black students stop having such a hard time, especially when they are first generation, or first time in college, or your family went to community college, but they didn't go to a four-year school. All of the nuisances in between that. I wanted students to come in and have good experiences, and now I'm like, 'Okay you're getting an opportunity to do that. So, remember what you just went though.' It doesn't have to be in this negative lens, but it definitely has been an experience and a heavy learning experience. And make sure that you're paying attention to all those things when you have to reschedule another appointment with a student, or you feel like you don't have time to get something out, or you were focused on this and you joined too many things, and now you're more about sitting on a committee than actually paying attention to your students. That stuff gets away from you. So, you have got to do real checks. I don't know how long it takes for that to happen. It could be ten years from now, it could be twenty years from now. But in any case, I hope I'm paying attention.

Like Samantha, Bobbi expressed how her experiences and interactions in the program and beyond will ultimately shape her research and her career. She specifically mentioned wanting to make sure her students felt like they belonged and that they had a voice that could be shared.

> My experience from the program stems from different aspects. My interactions with people, my interactions with students of color on campus, my interaction with international students, my interactions with colleagues, my interactions with professors. All of those things together are things I do reflect on and it's going to shape my next line

> of career and research. My experiences aren't just coming from being a student in the department of special ed. because that is just a tiny bit of my experience […] campus. Learning about research, I think incorporating all of that. For example, I know how it feels to feel left out, how it feels like you do not belong. So those are things I've been incorporating if I have to teach. I have to make sure that everyone feels like they belong to my class, and they have a voice, and their voices are important. Those are things that I think will shape my teaching and my career.

***Non-traditional roles.*** Gabby shared, that she wasn't currently using much of what she leaned in the Ph.D. program in her current job; however, she did express that there were things that she learned that's she wanted to make more use of. For example, she found it beneficial to be able to teach others about culturally responsive teaching, which is something she learned in her program. She also spoke of wanting to share knowledge that she gained from a doctoral program with people who wouldn't otherwise be exposed to such concepts. She also reflected specifically on wanting to use knowledge gained from her multicultural concentration to work in a place with children of color.

> Right now, I'm not really using that much of what I've learned. Not really. I was doing this job while I was finishing my last year. This is the kind of stuff I knew from teaching - I know special ed. law and things like that. But, I'm not really using research or any of those types of things on my job. I do think it would be nice to be able to work in a place where I can teach other teachers about CRT. I did learn a lot about it, but I'm in a district where it's not very diverse. I did a professional development this summer on stigma and how it effects different communities of color, and it was very received. We don't have a very diverse district, but there are a few instances where teachers have said, 'I don't really know how to work with this Pakistani family, or this family from Haiti.' So, it was really good to be able to field questions and be able to direct people. That's something I've learned that I've been able to use. I think it would be beneficial if I worked in a place where I researched and could share this knowledge. That gave me a little inkling of, 'Wow, people really don't know this stuff.' They don't really have access to a lot of things that you get from going through a Ph.D. program. I don't have any interest in being a researcher and being a part of academia though. I do want to be able use my skillset to be able to share this information with people. I feel I need to be in a place that's more multicultural for me to use my multicultural concentration. […] So, I just think about that. Kind of doing something similar to what I'm doing now, which is a special ed. coordinator, but doing that in a place where there are children of color, and I can make more of an impact. That's my long term, at the moment. […] Eventually, I would like to have my own school, so I would really be using a lot of stuff that I learned in the program then, for sure.

Adofo spoke of wanting to use her experiences to bring exposure to racial issues affecting education. She also briefly spoke of wanting to have an impact on cultivating more black special education teachers. She shared,

> I guess I would use it as far as shedding light on my experience to other people who would want to get their doctorate. Of course, this is significant of a broader context of white supremacy in the world. Not just in America, but it all facets of life. But trying to deconstruct racism in the classroom would be a definite fight. And then also trying to get more, and cultivate more, black special ed. teachers that would be something to probably go into and attain those.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings from this this study bright to light the lived experiences of a group of women who were experiencing the same phenomenon as black women doctoral students in a special education program at a predominately white institution. The participants faced many challenges and barriers to success in pursuit of their degrees; however, they also shared positive experiences that they will use to inform their practice in the future. The following chapter will further discuss how the findings from the data can be used to inform practice.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences and motivations of black women doctoral students in a special education program at a PWI in an effort to inform the educational and career trajectory of black women who, one day, plan to work in the special education field as members of the academy and/or as high-level practitioners. Using a bounded case study qualitative approach, the researcher was able to identify a number of thematic elements related to various aspects of the participants' experiences. These themes are also closely aligned to previous research on the experiences of black women doctoral students as well as many core themes which are found in the black feminist thought theoretical framework. By creating a space for these women to share their experiences through interviews and a focus group, a rich narrative was crafted that provided a nuanced glimpse into past and present experiences and their impact on what black women doctoral students in special education programs need to feel and be successful in their academic pursuits.

## Research Question 1 Findings

Research question 1 asked: What are the lived experiences of black women doctoral students in a special education program at a predominately white institution? In looking to examine these lived experiences, the researcher was able to identify several key themes from varying participant responses.

**Navigating the academic landscape of an institution.** Participants expressed multiple challenges related to navigating the academic landscape of their institution, and the findings in this area all align with existing literature about the experiences of black women in higher education. To begin, participants generally described their experiences at their institution as being negative and not feeling as though they belonged. This finding is consistent with prior studies of black women

doctoral students such as one conducted by Robinson (2013), which highlighted the voices of black women graduate students who shared the profound impact that their experiences had on how they were perceived at their institutions within the context of their black female identity. Additionally, participants also spoke about these feelings in relation to challenges and barriers associated with their racial/ethnic and gender identities as black women, unclear expectations about how to progress through the various stages of the program, and access to opportunities for advancement. When asked to discuss specific academic-related challenges they faced, some participants expressed that they were made to feel inferior at times, even though there was a general consensus that black women were just as capable, if not more capable than their white peers, of meeting the academic demands of doctoral studies. This finding was similar to that of a previous study done by Johnson-Bailey (2004) which found that black women doctoral students were not encouraged by faculty at their institution, nor did they feel as though they were treated with respect. The lack of funding was also discussed as a problem for participants, all of which worked at least part-time during the course of their program. This is another finding that is consistent with existing research on black women doctoral students. Johnson-Bailey & Cervero's (1996) study, for example, included women graduate students who struggled with meeting the demands of working full-time jobs to pay for school and support themselves and their families. Williams (2009), had similar findings in that black women were sometimes denied funding for their programs and were faced with financial barriers to success.

**Maintaining a healthy school/work/life balance.** Participants reflected on how the demands of meeting academic and work expectations sometimes negatively interfered with their personal lives. These findings were similar to themes that have emerged in previous research. Some participants faced challenges communicating with others about their unique experiences as black women in pursuit of a doctoral degree, and other participants expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness. These findings are similar to those of Schwartz et al. (2003), in which participants

discussed challenges such as being treated differently by family members after obtaining their degrees.

**Positionality and Relationships.** Participants also discussed how their positionality as black women sometimes had negative impacts on their complicated relationships with faculty members and peers as well as their lack of inclusion in their programs and the larger institution. Weak relationships and limited inclusion were found to have a negative impact on participant's ability to feel like they were receiving support that would make them competitive as students and adequately prepare them for their future careers. This finding is in line with Ellis' (2001) conclusion that race and gender impact socialization and satisfaction levels for graduate students to a greater degree for black women that for black men and white men and women. It is important to note that not all relational experiences shared by the participants in this study were negative. At some point during the study, each participant was able to speak positively about some of the relationships they had with their peers from similar backgrounds as certain faculty members within and outside of their departments. This is a finding that is common in existing literature on how black women build communities while in pursuit of their education.

**Positive reflections and systems of support.** Despite spending a significant amount of time discussing challenges and barriers, participants were also able to share thoughts on experiences that they found positive during their academic journey. All of the participants spoke favorably about the relationships that they formed with some members of their cohorts, faculty members, one specific staff member, and other people of color they encountered at the institution. Participants also shared the benefits they gained from courses and experiences that positively impacted their learning and skillset for their future roles. On the topic of systems of support, participants shared the need for mentors and allies that reflected and diversity and diversity of thought to better accommodate the needs of black women doctoral students. Participants also stressed the need for more funding for this population of students to lessen the burden of having to work while in school.

## Research Question 2 Findings

Research question 2 asked: What motivates black women to pursue doctoral degrees in special education?

**Overall reasons for pursing a degree.** Findings indicate that participants were primarily motivated to pursue their degrees as a means to help others and make improvements in the field. Two participants indicated they desired to be practitioners in the K-12 setting, and two participants shared they planned to be professors.

**Motivating factors for continued pursuit of a degree.** Despite being faced with challenges and barriers to success, participants also indicated that they intended to persist through the program because of personal motivations to make a positive impact and help others. Some participants also mentioned the significant financial implications associated with completing their studies.

**Impact of doctoral experiences on future roles.** Finally, each participant was able to share multiple ways in which their personal experiences as doctoral students would impact their roles in the future. Primarily, participants described how they saw themselves as using their experiences as students to make better experiences for people of color in the field and in the academy.

## Implications for Practice

The findings from this study provide a number of takeaways for special education doctoral programs at institutions of higher education as well as for black women who are currently doctoral students, or who are contemplating pursuing a degree.

**Addressing positionality as black women doctoral students.** Participants shared how race, gender, and class differences presented obstacles when interacting with faculty and peers of

different races and genders. Participants also shared how differences and cultural expectations could negatively impact their academic experiences. Some participants indicated they faced challenges studying or even discussing issues of race, gender, and class with their peers and with faculty members, and they shared instances of being met with discouraging comments from their peers and professors when attempting to interject race, gender, class, and other elements of diversity into their academic experiences.

These findings suggest faculty members need to make more of an effort to create inclusive environments for black students. More attention should be given to find ways to empower black women to not only speak about issues related to race, class, and gender, but to also be able to study those issues freely. Institutions should see to it that faculty members receive training that will enable them to properly facilitate classroom discussions on culture and diversity. Institutions should also aim to have diversity in their staff, which can potentially increase the number of faculty members who possess the skillset to effectively teach on topics related to culture and diversity. Institutions should also ensure programs are in place that allow and support identity development and expression for students of color so that students who feel marginalized can have an outlet. Black women who find themselves struggling to adjust to the cultural challenges they face should be empowered to seek out mentors, form their own support groups, and share their concerns with faculty and university administrators without the threat of retaliation or consequences.

**Providing academic and financial supports.** Each participant in the study referenced how they lacked the academic support of their professors in one way or another, and other researchers have found this to be a common occurrence for black women doctoral students (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Williams, et al., 2005; Borum & Walker, 2012). Findings from the study

and existing research also found that black women doctoral students were often in positions where they did not have adequate financial support to fully focus on school. Research demonstrates that black women have a uniquely difficult academic experience because of factors influenced by their gender and race. Because of this, it is important for faculty members seek out ways to better support this population of women both academically and financially.

The establishment of well-defined mentoring programs that can be used to support black women doctoral students is an approach that institutions of higher learning could adopt. By pairing students with faculty mentors in their field, universities can increase their exposure to opportunities that will help them grown and develop as scholars. Additionally, mentoring relationships may open up opportunities for research, teaching experiences, and the development of other skills that are necessary to be a successful student and eventually a successful faculty member and/or practitioner. Another academic support black women doctoral students could benefit from are programs that address any potential skill or knowledge deficits that they may have when beginning their studies. Although participants in this study did not express that they struggled with topics such as comprehension of content or academic writing, some of the participants shared that they were not aware of what was expected of them as doctoral students and how to progress through the various stages of their program.

Each participant in this study expressed some difficulty with the financial aspects of being a doctoral student. They all also held either full-time or part-time jobs while going to school. This is reflective of what other studies of black women doctoral students have found. (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero 1996 & Williams, 2009). Working to the extent that some of the participants in this study did is atypical for most traditional doctoral students; however, black women tend to have family obligations that often require them to be the primary breadwinner for

their households. For this reason, institutions should consider providing adequate and equitable funding packages and scholarships for black women doctoral students whenever possible. Doing so not only would address the financial challenges, but also have the potential to decrease the school/work/life balance issues caused by having to work and care for a family, in addition to managing academic obligations.

**Creating an inclusive university environment.** Data emerged from the study which showed black women often do not feel as though they belong at their universities and/or in their departments. Feelings of being isolated and not accepted can be terribly damaging to a person's self-esteem, as evidenced by the reflections of some of the participants. These negative feelings can often cause students not to persist in pursuit of their degree. Similarly to their potential impact on other aspects of the student experience, mentoring programs can be useful for the purpose of creating a more inclusive university environment. However, other practices such as sponsored student organizations or organized social gatherings can be helpful. Mentoring can help black doctoral students feel connected to faculty. Participation in student organizations and organized social gatherings can help black doctoral students meet other students and form relationships that can positively impact their experiences in class and outside of class. It is important to note that although universities and individual departments can sponsor organizations and host gatherings with the intent of being inclusive, black women should also take advantage of such opportunities and participate.

## Theoretical Connections and Implications

This study was conceptually grounded in black feminist thought and interpretivism. When considering the findings, there were significant connections between the experiences of the participants and tenets of black feminist thought. To begin, the intersectionality of race and

gender presented many barriers to success for participants. Black feminist thought has historically focused on understanding experiences that were unique to black women in a variety of settings. This framework also gives power to black women as the creators of knowledge about their experiences that can be shared with others (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). Because this study was conducted by a black woman, with black women participants, and with a purpose to help black women and children, it clearly speaks to the essence of what black feminist thought aims to do. The black women who participated in this study powerfully told their stories with the intent of creating a narrative about their experiences that can be used to educate others and possibly create better experiences for other black women doctoral students in the future. In addition to the impact of black feminist thought on scope of this study, there were several key connections between components of the framework and findings in the data.

Collins' (2009) conceptualization of black feminist thought includes seven core themes which are used to interpret the experiences of black women. They are: work, family, and black women's oppression; mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images; the power of self-definition; the sexual politics of black womanhood; black women's love relationships; black women and motherhood; and rethinking black women's activism. Most of these core themes were reflected in the narratives of the participants in this study.

The theme of work, family, and black women's oppression draws attention to the relationships between work obligations and personal and/or family responsibilities for black women who are often required to balance both out of necessity. Collins (2009) notes that there are two aspects of the traditional family ideal that have been historically challenging for black women. One being the believed split between the public-facing sphere of their paid employment as professionals and the other being the private sphere of the unpaid family responsibilities.

Participants in this study spoke candidly about challenges they faced meeting the demands of their career as doctoral students while also overcoming barriers in their personal lives (e.g., caring for children, working to support family members, and losing friends in the process of pursuing their education. Samantha, for example, shared challenges she initially faced when she began her doctoral program while working full-time and caring for family members. Bobbi also reflected on her struggles to meet the demands of being a student, having a graduate assistantship, and caring for her family. Another aspect of this theme discussed by Collins states that black women become less feminine due to their working outside of the home and working for pay to compete with men. This view was similarly shared by Adofo, who drew comparisons to her positionality as a black woman student that did not receive funding to her observations of white students who had trust funds and people to take care of them. Bobbi also mentioned the need to work to provide for her family, which was something she felt she needed to do as a black woman.

The next tenant of Collin's (2009) black feminist thought examined the role of black women as "mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images (pg. 76)." In this view, Collins examines the objectification of black women as others, as a form of oppression. Gabbi specifically spoke to this viewpoint when she shared that she was hesitant to speak negatively about her experiences due to the tendency of black women to be othered and viewed as less as their peers. Samantha and Adofo's strong viewpoints about being exploited by faculty members for their intellectual contributions have striking similarities to black feminist thought's historical views on black women as "mammies." For example, Collins notes that historically, no matter how loved black housekeepers were by their white families, they still remained poor because they were economically exploited workers that were victims of a capitalist political economy.

One of the findings from this study supports this view, in that, every participant expressed that they did not receive the same type of financial support and/or opportunities as students and as workers.

Collins (2009) cites the power of self-definition as key characteristic of the black woman's experience. Within this particular theme, black women's relationships with each other play a significant role in how they see and shape the world around them. Collins' description of black feminist thought speaks of a phenomenon of shared recognition between black women who do not know each other but who see value in recognizing black womanhood. Examples of this occurred throughout the focus group, as the participants, none of whom knew each other, were able to draw connections between their lived experiences and get to a point where they were finishing each other's sentences and stories because of how closely their lives were connected.

The sexual politics of black women and their love relationships were two aspects of black feminist thought that did not emerge as much in this study. Given the academic and professional focus of the study, there was not a particular need to discuss sexuality. Romantic relationships; however, were briefly touched on by some participants. Collins (2009) discusses the aloneness that black women can feel when it comes to romantic relationships. Gabby and Adofo, the two participants without spouses and partners, reflected on being and feeling alone while pursuing their studies.

Another critical component of black feminist thought is the concept of black women and motherhood or mothering. Collins (2009) describes that mothering can exist in many forms – bloodmothers, othermothers, and women-centered networks. The presence of other mothers and women-centered networks appeared frequently throughout the reflections of the participants.

Each participant spoke at length about the importance and influence of the graduate coordinator in their department. This woman served as an other mother for them in a variety of ways ranging from helping them navigate the steps to get through their programs to being a comforting figure in times of need. Additionally, participants, such as Samantha, demonstrated their intent to serve as other mothers for women like themselves in the future. The importance of black women-centered networks also came up in data obtained from this study. Participants frequently discussed the importance of their networks of other women of color and the impact those networks had on their abilities to feel and be successful.

The final theme of Collins' (2009) black feminist thought framework examines black women's activism. Collins theorizes about the ability of black women to sustain an independent conscious as a type of freedom that enables them to engage in forms of resistance. In many ways, the women in this study exhibited an independent conscious about their positionality as black women. This consciousness also allowed for some of them to express resistance to the academy as a political institution because of their views on how they were treated as students and how they felt they would likely be treated as faculty members. Another aspect of black women activism involves struggles for institutional transformation that many black women attempt to overcome. The very purpose of this study was to inform institutional transformation for the betterment of black women, and two of the participants, Samantha and Bobbi intend to enter the academy to promote institutional change.

In addition to the key themes of black flack feminist thought this study also speaks to Dillard's (2000) view that given the recent interest in multiculturalism in society, there is a need for epistemological alternatives that enable individuals from diverse and complex populations to share their stories. Using an interpretivist approach, the researcher was able to understand how

black women characterized their experiences, environment, and interactions as doctoral students at PWIs. This approach also allowed for questioning and analysis to determine how black women responded to the barriers they faced. The act of participating in the study, especially the focus group, was a positive experience for the participants. Even though they only spoke on the phone with each other, the process of telling their stories and bonding over shared experiences connected them in a meaningful way. Additionally, participants all spoke of being empowered by having the space to share their stories. The methodology employed for this study, and its resulting implications, support Collins' (2009) view that black women can become empowered through self-knowledge, even when that knowledge is developed within conditions that limit their ability to act.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings of this study indicate there is consistency in the challenges and barriers to success experienced by black women doctoral students; however, findings also show the significant possibilities for improving the overall experience for this population of students and others. Future studies should seek to include more participants with a greater diversity of characteristics. One way to potentially do this is by employing more quantitative and mixed-methods approaches to researching this topic. Although the researcher intentionally sought to do a qualitative case study, there is a great potential befit to looking at characteristics and experiences of black women doctoral students from a quantitative perspective. No purely quantitative studies were found in the existing literature on the topic, quantitative data on factors such as academic performance and attrition of black women doctoral students in special education programs could be helpful in further understanding their experiences. Additionally, few mixed-methods studies have been conducted using a large population of black women doctoral students in education-related programs. It is quite possible that larger studies with more generalizable data could be useful in bringing attention to these issues.

Despite the fact that the percentage of black women who hold doctoral degrees is the highest among all other race and gender groups, that does not mean that all black women who start doctoral programs complete them (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). The findings from this study were based on participants who were all currently enrolled in a doctoral program, and none of them dropped out before completing their degree. Studying the experiences of black women who did not complete their programs will likely add to the research on experiences of current and graduated students, but it is also possible that information about additional obstacles may emerge. Alternatively, it could also be beneficial to study the experiences of black women who have graduated from their programs and are somewhat removed from their experiences. Although the participants in this study were quite candid about their experiences, it is possible that they did not fully disclose all of their feelings due to the potential for a negative impact on their progression through their program.

Participants in this study highlighted the need for mentorship and allies in their program. Although there is a modest, but promising body of research on mentoring relationships and programs for black women in doctoral programs, there exists a significant gap in the literature where researchers have yet to conduct studies that seek to identify what elements and characteristics are necessary for mentoring programs to be effective. Additionally, conducting studies that seek to create interventions based on the challenges that have been identified by previous research could lead to a more targeted approve for helping black women be successful in pursuit of the doctoral degrees.

Some participants alluded to feeling as though their professors and peers had negative perceptions of their abilities as students because of their race and/or gender. This is also a finding from some research on the experiences of black women doctoral students (Tuitt, 2010; Williams

et al., 2005). There exist no studies that have collected data from professors or other students that could have been used to provide insight into the expressed perceptions of the participants. Although it could be challenging to do, collecting data on the perspectives and even observable behaviors of professors and peers could be an informative approach to begin looking at ways to foster more cohesive learning environments. Additionally, identifying trends in perceptions and behaviors of professors could potentially inform the implementation of policies, practices, and programming that could be used to support not just black women doctoral students, but students also students at all levels.

Even though black women are more likely to pursue doctoral degrees in education related programs, they are still often underrepresented in particular programs. Special education is one such example of a doctoral program of study where black women are often underrepresented and/or are unlikely to learn in an environment where race and culture is adequately accounted for (Kea, Penny, & Bowman, 2003). Given the issues of racial disproportionalities in special education for students, there is a significant need for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers in the field who are from diverse backgrounds to help create solutions to the challenges caused by disproportionalities in the field (Talbert-Johnson, 2001). Additionally, there is a market demand for special education faculty across the country (Montrosse & Young, 2012), which could be capitalized upon by black women who are generally underrepresented in higher education positions. Additional research should be conducted to explore how to specifically increase the representation of black women doctoral students in special-education related programs.

Finally, it should be noted that black women are not the only population of doctoral students who have unique experiences in pursuit of their degrees. Other ethnic minority, gender,

and class groups should also be studied to shed light on ways that universities can make the doctoral experience inclusive and welcoming for all students. Additionally, it could be beneficial to explore the lived experiences of white students to provide insight on the experiences of students from a comparative perspective. This study intentionally included a sample size ($n$=4) that was very small. Although the number of participants represented a majority of the total population for one particular special education department, it may not provide a large enough group to generalize findings more broadly. By studying additional populations that can yield larger sample sizes, more insight can be gained into the experiences of others.

**Delimitations**

The researcher made multiple choices about the design of the study based on the desire to capture specific aspects of the experiences of the participants. The sample size, for example, was intentionally set at a small number for two primary reasons. To begin, the study was designed to examine the experiences of a specific population of students within a unique environment. The inclusion of four participants in this study represented a majority of the target population within the environment. Additionally, the researcher wanted to ensure that it would be possible to into depth with each participant's personal story. By limiting the sample size and keeping the focus group small, the researcher was able to collect an extensive amount of meaningful data from participants. Another delimitation of this study was the qualitative design, which excluded the use of any quantitative measures. When conceptualizing the study, the researcher sought to employ methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, that were designed to elicit the most candid and personal responses from participants. By using a qualitative methodology, the researcher was able to capture and analyze rich data that painted vivid pictures of the experiences and perceptions of participants. A final delimitation of this study is the setting. The purpose of

this study was to examine the experiences of black women at PWIs; therefore, none of the participants included students from other types of universities, including HBCUs. It was the intent of the researcher to study participants who were attending a PWI because of the prevalence of black women doctoral students who expressed challenges and barriers at PWIs in previous literature. Even though this study focused on black women at PWIs, it is important to note that the lived experiences of black women doctoral students at other types of universities should be studied further.

**Limitations**

This study was conducted by a single researcher; therefore, there was no opportunity for measures that would have allowed for inter-rater reliability that could have strengthened the interpretations of findings and themes. The researcher did use triangulation of data sources and member-checking with the participants; however, the final analysis was the result of a singular researcher.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study provided an in-depth look into the lives of four black women who were pursing doctoral degrees in special education. The first research question provided insight into the lived experiences of this population of students. Although many challenges and barriers existed for these women, they were also able to share ways they coped and persisted in order to obtain their degrees. The second research question called for participants to reflect on their motivations for pursing a doctoral degree in special education, and participants shared a general desire to help others and make improvements in the field for people with disabilities and for people of color. In reviewing the joys and pains associated with the pursuit of educational attainment at the highest level for a population that often faces barriers and obstacles in many

other aspects of life, some insight was provided that will hopefully lead to improvements to better support a much-needed group of special educators.

## Epilogue

Conducting this study was a deeply personal journey for me. As a black woman, a doctoral student at a PWI, and a special educator, I am just as much of a participant as Adofo, Bobbi, Gabby, and Samantha. As I listened to their reflections and experiences during the interviews and focus groups, I heard my own story being told. Like the brilliant and brave black women in this study, I have faced barriers and challenges in pursuit of my doctoral degree. I have had to overcome professional and personal setbacks that, at times, made me feel as though I would never complete the journey I started many, many years ago. I have now completed the journey, in large part, because of black women, other women of color, and allies who have been tremendous supporters throughout this process. Completing my program shows that it can be done; however, the findings from my study show that the process can be so much better. I set out to research the lived experiences of black women doctoral students because I wanted to create a space where women like myself could authentically tell their stories and be heard. It is my hope that my study will inform practices not just in special education programs or colleges of education, but in all types of doctoral programs that black women enroll in.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

*Black Women Special Education Doctoral Students: Opportunity to Participate in a Research Study*

This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of black women doctoral students in special education or special education-related programs at a predominately white institution (PWI). You will be asked to participate in two 1-2-hour interviews and a 2-hour focus group from February 2018 until April 2018. Interviews and the focus group participation can be in person or virtual. The interviews will be scheduled at your convenience, and the focus group would be scheduled based on participant availability. As a participant, you will also be asked to review follow up notes from interviews and focus groups and send the researcher any corrections or feedback. You are invited to participate in this study if you: self-identify as a black/African-American woman and you are enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in a special education or special education-related program at a PWI. Special education-related programs include disciplines that focus on serving individuals with disabilities and/or members of special populations. Women in social work, communications, or education doctoral programs are encouraged to participate in this student.

It is the hope of the researcher that findings from this study will be used to create interventions and programs at universities to help improve the experiences of black women who are pursing doctoral degrees in special education-related fields. As a participant, you will receive a summary of the study's findings via email. This study has been reviewed by the University of Texas at Austin Office of Research Support.

Participation in this study is confidential. If you would like to participate in this study, please respond to this message, and I will send information about the initial interview. If you are unable to participate in this study, but know someone who may be interested, please forward this invitation. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

## Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: Please respond to the following questions by circling the letter or writing in the answer that best fits you and your previous and current life situations. All responses are optional. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.

1. Please provide a pseudonym (this will be the name you use to protect your identity throughout the course of the study). _____
2. Age - What is your age?
    a. 18-23
    b. 24-26
    c. 27-29
    d. 30-39
    e. 40 or older
3. Gender Identity – How do you identify in terms of gender?
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Transgender
    d. Other _____
4. Ethnicity – How do you identify ethnically?
    a. African American/Black
    b. Asian
    c. Caucasian/White
    d. Hispanic/Latino/Mexican American
    e. Native American/American Indian
    f. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
    g. Biracial
    h. Other _____
5. Please list all previous degrees you have earned and the universities you attended.
6. What doctoral program are you in? _____
7. When did you start your doctoral program (semester/year)? _____
8. Are you currently employed? _____
9. If you are currently employed, are you part-time or full-time? _____
    a. Who is your employer? _____
10. What is your marital status?
    a. Single – Never married
    b. Single – Divorced
    c. Single – Widowed
    d. Married
    e. Married – Separated
11. Do you have children?
    a. If yes, how many children do you have? _____

## Appendix C: Interview #1 Protocol

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences. This interview will take up to two hours. If you need to leave before then, please let me know if you would like to reschedule. Before we continue, please take a few minutes to review and sign the informed consent form. It contains information about the study, and if you have any questions, I am happy to answer them. I would like to audio record our discussion, and I will also take notes. Please let me know if you are uncomfortable at any point during the interview. Your name and any other identifying information will not be included in the interview transcript or any data analysis. Do I have your consent to audio record? Thank you for agreeing to participate. Are you ready to begin?

1. Please take a few minutes to complete a brief demographic questionnaire. All questions are optional, so you may skip questions you are not comfortable answering.
2. Please state your pseudonym.
3. What program are you in?
4. How many years have you been in this program? When do you expect to graduate?
5. Why are you pursuing this degree in special education? What are your plans after finishing school?
6. Tell me about your experiences as a doctoral student at this institution?
7. Do you find being a doctoral student at this institution challenging?
    a. (If yes) - What has made your experience challenging?
        i. What do you think are the causes of these challenges?
    b. (If no) - Why do you think your experience hasn't been challenging?
8. Have you faced any barriers to success in pursuit of completion of your doctorate since arriving at this institution?
    a. (If yes) - Can you describe them?
        i. What do you think are the causes of these barriers?
    b. (If no) – Why do you think you have avoided encountering barriers to success in pursuit of completion of your doctorate?
9. Are you currently facing any barriers to success in pursuit of completion of your doctorate?
    a. (If yes) - Can you describe them?
        i. What do you think are the causes of these barriers?
    b. (If no) – How have you been able to avoid encountering barriers to success in pursuit of completion of your doctorate?
10. Have you experienced any barriers to success associated with navigating the academic landscape of your institution?
    a. (If yes) - Can you describe them?
    b. (If no) – Why do you think you have avoided doing so?
11. Have you experienced any barriers to success associated with maintaining school/work/life balance?
    a. (If yes) - Can you describe them?
    b. (If no) – Why do you think you have avoided doing so?
12. Have you experienced any barriers to success associated with career planning?
    a. (If yes) - Can you describe them?
    b. (If no) – Why do you think you have avoided doing so?

13. Despite the challenges and barriers that you have shared, what motivates you to continue to pursue your doctorate at this institution?
14. What have been some of your most positive experiences as a doctoral student?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I will email a transcript of our interview along with my notes for your review and verification within the next 48 hours. If you know of any other students who would be a good fit for this study, please share my contact information with them.

## Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Introduction: Thank you all for taking the time to participate in this focus group. I've interviewed each of you, and you all provided a tremendous amount of insight into what it is like to be a black woman in pursuit of a Ph.D. The purpose of this focus group is to dive deeper into your experiences as black women doctoral students and explore commonalities and differences in experiences. Before we continue, please take a few minutes to review and sign the informed consent form. It contains information about the study, and if you have any questions, I am happy to answer them.

(Take a break and distribute informed consents)

The results from this study will be used to one day inform programming and interventions to help improve the experiences of women like yourself. It is important that you answer as honestly and comfortably as you can. I will ask you several open questions. Your personal opinions and viewpoints are very important, and there are no right or wrong answers. Please feel welcome to express yourself freely during this discussion and do give everyone the chance to express their opinion during the conversation. The conversation will be recorded, but this is only for the purpose for research. Only the research team will listen to the tape, and no names or personal information will be used in the report. The discussion will last for about 90 minutes, and please switch off your mobile phones. Is everything clear about the course of the focus group discussion?

1. Everyone, please go around and introduce yourself using your pseudonym.
2. How would you describe your experiences as a doctoral student to someone who isn't a black woman in a Ph.D. program?
3. Are you stressed or have you recently experienced stressful situations as a result of being a doctoral student?
    a. If yes, what are the causes of your stress?
    b. How do you cope with your stress?
4. Has your pursuit of your Ph.D. caused any challenges in your personal relationships outside of school?
5. Describe your relationships with the faculty that you interact with.
6. Do you feel supported by the faculty and staff in your department?
    a. If yes, how so?
    b. If no, why not?
7. Describe your relationships with your peers??
8. Do you feel supported by your peers?
    a. If yes, how so?
    b. If no, why not?
9. Do you feel included in your program?
    a. What makes you feel this way?
10. Do you feel included in the overall community of your institution?
    a. What makes you feel this way?

11. Do you have a support group?
    a. If no, why not?
    b. If yes, who makes up your support group?
    c. In what ways do the members of your support group help you academically? Socially? Emotionally? Other?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for taking the time to share with each other today. I hope this was a positive experience. I will email a transcript of this focus group discussion along with my notes for each of you to review and verify within the next 48 hours. I will also reach out to set up times for the follow-up interview. Thank you all for your participation.

## Appendix E: Interview #2 Protocol

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences. This interview will take up to two hours. If you need to leave before then, please let me know if you would like to reschedule. Before we continue, please take a few minutes to review and sign the informed consent form. It contains information about the study, and if you have any questions, I am happy to answer them. I would like to audio record our discussion, and I will also take notes. Please let me know if you are uncomfortable at any point during the interview. Your name and any other identifying information will not be included in the interview transcript or any data analysis. Do I have your consent to audio record? Thank you for agreeing to participate. Are you ready to begin?

1. Please state your pseudonym.
2. Thinking back to our first conversation and the discussion during the focus group, is there anything you would like to add or share about your experiences and/or perceptions as a black woman doctoral student at a PWI?
3. During our previous conversations, you shared challenges and barriers that you have faced in pursuit of your education. What actions have you taken/are you taking to address these challenges?
    a. Have any of these actions been effective for you?
4. How did it feel hearing the other women share their experiences during the focus group?
    a. Have you ever had a conversation like this with your black women peers before?
    b. What was your biggest takeaway from the experience?
5. Do you feel like you are set up to successfully complete your program?
    a. (If yes) – What makes you feel this way?
    b. (If no) – Why not?
6. Considering your takeaways from our first interview and the focus group, what do you think black women need to be successful in a special education doctoral program like the one you are in?
7. Once you complete your program, how do you see yourself using what you have learned in the field?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I will email a transcript of our interview along with my notes for your review and verification within the next 48 hours. This was our final interview, so I will share the results of this study with you in the next six to eight weeks. Thank you again for your participation in this study, and good luck with your studies.

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